



Bloom into You

Regarding Saeki Sayaka

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NOVEL

1

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Bloom [♡]into You [♡]

Regarding Saeki Sayaka

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STORY | Hitoma Iruma
ART & DESIGNS | Nakatani Nio

But even if so much time has passed
that I no longer remember much,
it will never truly disappear.

The scars,
the warmth
—all of it.





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BLOOM INTO YOU: REGARDING SAEKI SAYAKA VOL. 1

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NOVEL

1

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Seven Seas Entertainment

Saeki Sayaka: Year 5, Group 3

THIS MAY SOUND ARROGANT, but I knew early on that I was talented.

When I say “talented,” I mean that I can get results when I work really hard and that I can maintain those results, too. I think I understood the value of those two things much sooner than the other kids.

Thus, I didn’t mind that my after-school schedule was full of lessons. There were *ikebana* classes, calligraphy school, piano, cram school, and once I was a third year in elementary school, swimming lessons, too. I was considering taking on English speaking classes next. I pretty much took anything available to me. As a kid, I felt lucky that I was even allowed those choices.

Even a child could see that that my house was a respectable one. We had a lacquered gate, a side door for the help on the left side, and many tall trees in our garden. The surrounding walls were tall enough to prevent anyone from peering inside. Our house was bigger than the entirety of the light-green apartment complex across from us. In addition to my parents and I, my grandparents on my father’s side and their two cats lived there. It was quite a lot of space for so few people.

Growing up in that house, I knew I had no choice but to be talented. No one actually said as much, but I knew instinctively that it was true. As long as I kept moving with purpose and produced good results, my parents never seemed upset. What parents wouldn’t be happy to have an exceptional kid?

Today, as always, I made it home and started preparing for my lessons as soon as I put down my backpack. Since both my parents were at work, the house was quiet. My grandparents had stayed home that day, so the housekeeper wasn’t around, either. Just walking home from elementary school always left me parched, so I went to the kitchen and drank a cup of water. The sound of chirping cicadas filtered through the ventilation system.

I grabbed the bag with all my swimming gear and left the house. I had swim

class once a week on Wednesdays. Although this wasn't on purpose, it was easy to remember that I went into the water on Wednesday, since they both started with a W.

Instead of heading straight to my lesson, though, I took a small detour, walking around the house to take a look at the garden.

Our cats could usually be found in the passage that connected to my grandparents' side of the house. Sure enough, they were both there: one tortoiseshell, one black and white piebald. It hadn't been long since they came to live with us, but they had made themselves at home right away, so they didn't budge as I approached them. When the cats were in a good mood, they would allow people to touch them, but who knew how it would go today?

I bent down and pet the black and white cat. It looked up grouchy and bolted after only a few seconds. The tortoiseshell cat followed suit, and they both hid in the shade.

"Oh, well."

I watched them go and then headed to class.

As I walked through the neighborhood, I could still hear the cicadas chirping. When I listened carefully, I could hear different nuances in the sounds on my right and on my left. Wondering if the types of cicadas living on each side were different, I looked around. The unchanging scenery of the neighborhood shimmered in my eyes.

For some reason, perhaps because of the summer heat, there was a constant buzzing in my ears.

I emerged onto a main street and made it across two crosswalks. From there, it was about a ten-minute walk in a straight line to my destination, a small swimming school downtown. It was a long and narrow building, and kind of strange at that: the reception desk was on the second floor, while the pool the school used was one floor underground. I had no idea what was on the first floor or even how one could get to it.

The building was connected to a big paid parking lot on the side; the staff members often warned me to be careful of cars going in and out. There were

two buses lined up in front of the school now. I watched the people and wheelchairs emerging from the buses out of the corner of my eye while I headed to the stairs.

“Oh! Saeki-san.”

Hearing someone call my name, I turned around. It was another girl in my class. She must have come right over without going home, since she still had her school backpack on.

She went to a different school, so we weren’t really close—not that I played with the kids from my own school much, either.

The girl skipped a step on the stairs to catch up to me. “Hello,” I greeted her coolly. I didn’t really like this girl.

“Don’t you go to school, Saeki-san?”

“What?”

What a bizarre question. I stared at her as we went through the automatic door into the building. The employee at the reception desk greeted me with a smile, and I showed her my card in response.

The other girl held hers out at the same time, so the receptionist took both cards and handed us each a locker key for the changing room. I saw the number flash by and secretly felt relieved that the girl was at a locker far away from mine.

The air conditioning was on full blast inside, cooling my neck. The wall to the left of the reception desk was glass, so you could see the pool in the basement below. There were calm ripples on the pool reflecting the slightly dim lights.

“What was that about earlier?” I asked on the way to the changing room.

“Well, ’cause your skin is so pale.”

It hadn’t been long since the girl started coming to swimming lessons in July, but she was already tan. I suppose my skin didn’t have much color compared to hers.

“I thought maybe you just never went outside,” she added.

Her jet-black, neck-length hair, which seemed as if it were designed to complement her skin, swayed gently. We weren't even in the pool yet, but somehow it already looked sort of damp. I looked at it as I answered bluntly, "Of course I go outside."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Plus, you're super serious all the time."

Her random opinions were all over the place, as was her ever-changing expression. This girl was a little shorter than me and sunburned right up to the hairline on her forehead. If her hair were any shorter, people would probably mistake her for a skinny little boy.

"You're the most dedicated one in swim class, too, Saeki-san."

I was getting fed up with her and her strange comments. It always irritated me when people I didn't get along with acted like they knew me really well.

There was another reason I was sick of her, too.

"Maybe I am. And you're the least serious."

"Yeah, that's true."

She didn't seem to care when I pointed out her shortcomings. I didn't think I'd ever met anyone more shameless.

We passed the vending machines and went into the changing room, which had lockers stacked two high along the walls. The sink area had three faucets, which one of the staff members was cleaning with a towel. I opened the locker that matched the number on my key and put my bag inside. The girl did the same with her school backpack, shoving it in unceremoniously. She turned towards me, and our eyes met.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing."

I took off my clothes to change into the official swimsuit that the swimming school required us to wear. This time, though, I felt like I was being watched. When I looked over, that girl was staring at me with her hand still stuck in her locker.

"What?"

Now, I was the one asking her that. I didn't like the way she was ogling me.

"Nothing really."

She turned her face away immediately, and started taking out her swimsuit and swim cap. What was that all about? It wasn't like I wanted to be friends with her, but she always started talking to me whenever she saw me.

I went to the pool ahead of her, opening a door in the back that was different from where we'd entered. I passed under the weak green light that indicated the emergency exit, heading down the stairs. With each step, the air grew more and more humid. Just as my nose caught the smell of chlorine, the pool came into view.

When my feet went into the disinfectant at the entrance, the cold sent shivers up my spine.

There were a lot of other kids from my class by the pool already starting to stretch. I said hello to them and the instructor. The instructor was taller than my father, with dark skin and a cheerful orange shirt. He really was upbeat, too, which made his lessons easy to follow.

After I washed off at the showers and put on my swim cap, I started stretching like the other kids. With nobody in it yet, the pool was so calm that it almost felt like you could walk across its faintly glowing surface.

The pool was twenty-five meters long and had six lanes. I had once calculated how many people would need to stand side by side to cover the whole pool.

As I was stretching my legs, the other girl finally came in, late as usual. She said hello to all the other kids too, then came over to me for some reason. Even though she was wearing the same swimsuit as me, her suntanned arms and legs made it look entirely different on her. Her tan was so even, it was almost like she was getting burned on purpose. There were just a few areas at the edges of her swimsuit where her skin was somewhat lighter.

"It's nice being in an inside pool where you can't get sunburned, huh?"

"That doesn't seem to stop you."

"You got me there."

She laughed as she went over to take a shower. Why did she insist on going out of her way to talk to me every chance she got? Maybe she was under the false impression that we were friends?

After she washed off, she didn't really stretch, just looked at the water from the side of the pool. That was just the kind of girl she was.

It was a weekday, so there were only six kids, including me. Obviously, there would be a lot more kids on the weekends. Watching out of the corner of my eye as the other kids lined up, I pinched my own arm. My skin really was the lightest out of everyone there. I wondered if it was because I never played outside during lunch breaks.

The instructors split up their lessons based on the class we were in. I was in intermediate. If you did well at your current level, you'd be promoted to the next one. Apparently, most kids didn't get into the higher classes until they started junior high.

Still, I never did like the way the word *intermediate* sounded. If I was going to do something, I wanted to be at the top. But I just couldn't age faster, no matter what I did. I couldn't catch up, but I also couldn't wait.

I thought of the cats at home and my grandparents.

As the instructor addressed the gathered students, I heard water splashing in the distance. I glanced over. Of course, it was that girl again. She never followed instructions—she just swam or wandered around whenever she wanted. The adults tried to get her to focus at first, but soon gave up and left her to her own devices. We had more than enough lanes, so it wasn't a problem. In theory, at least.

She never took anything seriously. She didn't even try to become a better swimmer, just played around to her heart's content. Why was she even taking swimming lessons?

I couldn't bring myself to like her. She rubbed me the wrong way. She was a nuisance, always messing around while I tried to focus. She was so cheerful and oblivious to everything around her that it seemed like there wasn't a single thought in her brain. She did seem to be having fun, but I couldn't imagine acting that way myself.

Our swim classes were usually about an hour long. We warmed up by walking a little in the water and then moved on to practicing technique. I didn't know the instructor's background, but he was a pretty good teacher. When I followed his instructions, it felt like the water didn't resist me quite so much. I guess we were learning to shed any unnecessary movements.

The other kids seemed to move more elegantly under his instruction, too. Since swimming took my whole body, my improvement was easier to see than in my other classes.

After about forty minutes of this, we each took a lane and timed ourselves swimming the length of the pool as fast as we could. The instructors always told us which stroke to use when that time came, and today it was the breaststroke. There were six kids and six lanes, so we could all swim at the same time. Even the girl who always messed around and never listened to instructions participated.

I hadn't meant for it to happen, but we ended up in neighboring lanes. After all the exertion, my ears felt warm even submerged in water. The other girl didn't look tired at all, though, and flashed me an innocent, toothy smile. I wondered if there was even a point to finding out how she swam. She'd just been playing around so far, after all.

Maybe she was smiling because she thought we were friends, but it just made me want to win even more.

To be honest, I didn't think I was particularly good at sports. But I still took these lessons seriously, so being slower than someone who wasn't even trying would make me downright miserable.

I was going to give it my absolute best.

The instructor got a stopwatch and whistle ready and gave us the signal to start. He tended to blow the whistle pretty abruptly, so it was difficult to react right on time. I dove into the water, which dulled my hearing as I kicked off the pool wall. I straightened out my body, streamlining myself as I moved forward, imagining that I was pushing my way through.

In the water, all I could see was blue. The sole patch of white was the name of the gym painted on the floor of the pool. I followed it with my eyes as I used the

momentum from my kick to get as far ahead as I could. Then I started to swim the breaststroke.

When I brought up my head, the first thing I saw was a shadow rushing past me, speedy as a passing fish.

The girl in the next lane got farther and farther ahead of me in the blink of an eye. I was shocked for a second, but then I looked at the way she was swimming and simply felt infuriated. A bubbly puff of breath escaped my mouth. That girl was pushing her way through the water by swimming a front crawl. She was fast, but all I could think was *what is she even doing?*

The foam left a wake behind her quickly fluttering legs. The rest of us just pushed through the water as though we were following her. This wasn't even about losing anymore—it wasn't even a match.

I was slower than the girl who did whatever she wanted, but I swam faster than the other kids. When the girl came back up to the water's surface, she threw her head back and held it up high, looking pleased. A long sigh of satisfaction left her lips.

She looked the happiest out of all six of us. Sure, it was probably fun doing whatever you wanted without actually learning, but that wasn't going to help her in the long run. She was fast, but she was going nowhere.

I had to believe that, I think, or I would've started doubting myself.

We walked around in the water for a while and then finished with stretches. After all that swimming, I was surprised at how heavy my limbs felt when I got out of the water. It was like there was an invisible hand on my shoulder trying to pull me back. In that moment, I thought I understood why fish don't come on land. Being in the water was easy.

Maybe that's why she's like that, I thought, and turned around. Even though our time was up, she was floating in the pool all by herself—just staring up at the dim lights as if she had even forgotten how to kick. I wondered what she was thinking. We were so different, I couldn't even begin to guess.

"Looks like you were the fastest today, Saeki."

It felt pretty good when our instructor said that, but something bothered me

a little. “Just today?” Had he said it that way on purpose? “But I was fastest last time, too.”

“Oh, right. That’s true.”

For some reason, the instructor glanced at the pool, looking a little troubled. Following his gaze toward the gentle waves rippling across the water, I could see only one thing disturbing the surface.

But there was no way anyone could win swimming breaststroke against a front crawl. It bothered me a little, but ultimately, she didn’t count.

Today, at least, I was the fastest. That was all I wanted to hear.

Once I decided to do something, I had to be the best at it. That was how I approached all of my many classes.

I had never really experienced someone overtaking me before.

Summer had started, and it was getting hot, but I still stayed in the classroom during lunch breaks. Most of my time after school was occupied with lessons, so I used the break to study.

My friends had already stopped inviting me to do things. I didn’t particularly mind. Playing with friends was fun, but improving myself was fun in its own way, too. If they were both the same amount of fun, it was obvious which one I would choose.

Today, I was writing the same kanji characters over and over again in my notebook. “佐伯沙弥香.”

They were the kanji for my name: Saeki Sayaka. We hadn’t learned any of those kanji in elementary school, so I had to practice them myself. It would be childish to keep writing it in hiragana, and even though I *was* a kid, I didn’t want to feel like I was lagging behind.

Once I learned the stroke order, it turned out the kanji weren’t that hard. It was like tracing symbols, so it still didn’t really feel like my name yet. The one that was easiest to remember was 伯. The hardest part was balancing the top and bottom of the 香. If I didn’t pay attention, one would get too big. I decided

that next time I went to calligraphy lessons, I would practice writing my name with a brush, too.

I wondered what my name meant. Now that I knew the shapes, I wanted to know their meanings, so I looked them up.

Learning one thing lead to learning the next thing. I repeated that cycle over and over, every day. There was always something new to learn.

I had piano lessons after school today. Since these were private lessons I took at home, it was just me. Learning piano meant I could read the sheet music for music class at school, so these lessons were probably the most practical, to be honest. I'm not sure I could say that my ikebana classes were all that relevant in school.

Still, they might be useful someday. Maybe after I became a junior high school student, then a high schooler, and then an adult. I was doing everything I could to prepare now, so I'd have no regrets in the future.

I closed my notebook once I was done practicing the kanji for my name and heard the cicadas start crying as though on cue. They sounded a lot more distant here at school than they did in the garden at home. When I listened more closely, the noise of kids playing on the school grounds drowned out the cicadas. The kids in the classroom were being loud, too. I was the only quiet one.

I didn't think I would achieve greatness just by studying a lot. I did think I might at least get a step or two ahead of the other kids.

Amid all that noise, I muttered my own name. I could still only mentally picture it in hiragana.

I was a little late leaving school that day, so I had to start running on the way home.

I felt that summer day like rain on my skin, as though I were leaving a trail of sweat behind me. As I ran, my breath going ragged, the ground seemed much harder than usual.

When I put my shoes on in the entryway to leave for swim class, the house cats came over to brush their heads against my legs, which was unusual for them. I couldn't just leave, so I petted them until I completely lost track of time. They were so cute, and it was so satisfying—right until I had to start running again. By the time I started sweating, the satisfaction was half-gone.

My shirt stuck uncomfortably to my back when I got to the swimming class building. Partway up the stairs, I stopped in my tracks. That girl was in front of the entrance to reception, wearing her backpack as usual. She was fiddling with the umbrellas in the two umbrella stands to the right of the doorway, taking them out and putting them back in.

“Oh, hey, Saeki-san.”

She had a green umbrella in her hand as she looked up at me. I turned around, checked the weather, and tilted my head at her in confusion.

“What are you doing?”

“I was just thinking how there are sooo many umbrellas here, even though it's so sunny out.”

“Right...”

It was true. There were almost ten of them in the stand, all different kinds and colors, and I wasn't sure whether they had been forgotten by kids or left out by the school as spares. Putting the umbrella back, the girl walked over to me.

“You're sweating a lot today. Did you run because you thought you'd be late?” she guessed, looking at my forehead.

“Yes, that's what happened.”

“Huh. Wow.”

She brought her face abruptly close to mine, then pulled back and looked me up and down. I looked back at her uncomfortably and was about to question her when she said, “I was just thinking I've never seen you run before, Saeki-san, so I can't really picture it.”

“Okay?”

“Plus, you kind of act like a rich girl.”

She wasn't exactly wrong, but hearing someone else say it to my face still annoyed me a bit. Maybe it bothered me when other people judged me based on how I was born or raised instead of by the things I'd earned myself.

She lined up next to me like it was completely natural. I narrowed my eyes until I was practically glaring at her. “Do you need something?”

“No. I just thought we could go in together.”

She pointed straight ahead while the automatic door opened. The cold air felt almost like a slap in the face as it blew over us.

As always, we traded our cards for keys at the reception desk. The girl compared our numbers and smiled. “Looks like our lockers are next to each other.”

Instead of agreeing, I just looked away. The pool below us seemed farther away than usual through the window.

“Oh, you don't look happy,” the girl said.

“It's nothing,” I answered, but she still looked anxious.

We started walking together without another word, and by the time we got to the lockers in the changing room, she seemed cheerful again.

“Y'know, I've always kinda wondered if that was the case.”

“What?”

“Do you not like me?”

Once again, she was asking me a difficult question right to my face as though it were the easiest thing in the world. I'd always thought that you were supposed to read the room and just tiptoe around things like this, but maybe that wasn't necessary at all?

“Do you want me to answer honestly?”

She smiled wryly. “When you put it that way, you've pretty much already told me the answer.”

“I guess I have.” *That was why I phrased it that way in the first place.*

“Wow. I’m kinda shocked.” The girl put her forehead against her locker, looking obviously depressed. But she was always joking around like that, so I didn’t quite believe it was real. I wondered if she knew that, though.

Paying her no mind, I opened my locker, took my swimsuit and swim cap out of my bag, and pulled out my goggles.

“What do you not like about me?” the girl asked.

She wasn’t changing out of her clothes. Her eyes looked harder and sharper than usual as she asked the question, so she was clearly being serious for once. It was only then that I felt inclined to keep talking to her.

“What’s the point in asking me that?”

“Well, if it’s something I can fix, I figured I might try to fix it.”

She grinned sheepishly. Which was exactly the problem.

“It’s how you’re never serious.”

“Ohh, so that’s it.” The girl stopped smiling.

“It’s a real nuisance, you know? Everyone around you is trying to do things the right way, but you’re just messing around.”

I was being blunt now. She shrank back at first, as if wounded by my verbal attack, but then seemed to relax, her eyes wandering.

“So that’s how it is,” she said casually.

“It is.”

“Hm... Well, I guess it’s not like I care what’s going on around me.”

If she really didn’t care, why would it bother her that I didn’t like her?

“Okay,” she said briskly and closed her locker.

I didn’t know what was *okay*, but okay, I might as well change and go ahead of her, then.

Before I left the changing room, I turned around. She was quietly taking off her clothes, her mouth shut tight.

I headed towards the pool, showered as usual, and then stretched. Though I

acted aloof, I did turn my eyes towards the entrance of the changing room every once in a while. I was a little worried about the girl. Just a tiny bit.

She joined us soon. After she showered, she started stretching, which was different for her. So different, in fact, that everyone started to freak out, including me. But she just kept stretching her legs as if it was perfectly normal for her.

After that, the six of us got together when the instructor called us to form a line... Wait, six of us? Our five pairs of eyes all slid to the right.

Against all odds, the girl was actually following instructions. Everyone looked stunned, including the instructor. I was suspicious, but she simply stood there with a straight face.

That day, the girl followed instructions like everyone else. She didn't complain, didn't rock the boat, and kept to herself, just like me. We all assumed it was a short-lived whim, but she never once wandered off.

I was the only one who knew why she might have had a change of heart. I could almost see our conversation in the changing room connected to this point by a string. Was she doing this because I said I didn't like how she wasn't serious?

But why? I thought, genuinely confused by the extreme change. I wondered if she really had thought we were friends until now.

Even when I dove down into the water, she floated through my head like bubbles.

When I rose to the surface of the water and turned, there she was, like it was the most natural thing in the world. And whenever our eyes met, she didn't say anything, just kept moving as though nothing had happened. If she could do all of that, she should have done it from the start. I wondered what she was thinking, so much so that I ended up being the one looking at her instead of her at me.

She kept her cool all the way to the usual competition at the end of the class. I was convinced she would probably swim using the same stroke as me today. In that case, I really couldn't lose against her on the one day she started taking

things seriously.

Though I did my best to make sure it didn't show, the truth was that I felt really competitive. But at the same time, I was really anxious, too.

Following the whistle, the girl and I kicked off the wall at the same time and sank into the water. Today's stroke was the front crawl. Our start was a precise reenactment of the previous day, as if outlining the very future of the match.

This time, when we swam the same stroke and went forward the same way, she slowly overtook me. When I tried to make up the distance by fluttering my legs in a panic, she just gained even more. No matter how much I struggled, churning through the water and pushing my shoulders forward, I couldn't catch up. In the end, I just watched the backs of her feet vanish into the distance.

What was so different about us? I started to doubt my own swimming abilities as I completed the twenty-five meters. When I blew out a spray of bubbles as I broke the surface, she was already there, watching as if she had been waiting for me.

"I'll try to take things seriously from now on." The water droplets divided her face as she looked at me.

I looked back at her, not wiping the water from my face either. I could feel a faint warmth deep in my cheeks, and a feeling that was almost like shame. I always thought that as long as I was serious, there was no way I'd lose. But now I had. Where should I go from here?

"So if I do that, y'know, um... Will you be my friend?" For once, her voice went quiet, like she was letting a little bit of weakness show.

Why did she want to be friends with me so badly? We only saw each other for an hour once a week, and it didn't seem like we had anything in common. But if she wasn't going to just mess around anymore, then I supposed there really wasn't any reason for me to dislike her.

Still, for some reason, I felt resistant to the idea. Somewhere deep down inside, like the sediment at the bottom of a river.

"Sure."

I pushed that hesitation aside and agreed. In response, the once-a-week friend I had accepted gave a relieved-looking smile.

It was a soft smile, like the surface of water undisturbed by people.

Sunday was the only day I didn't have any lessons. That just meant there were none available that day at the moment, though I wouldn't be surprised if I added something new in the future. After I finished my homework, I heard a mewling sound in the hall, so I left my room.

The tortoiseshell cat was roaming around the hallway. I was drawn right in by its swaying tail despite myself, but the oversensitive cat whirled around as soon as I tried to get near it. "Hello," I greeted, making a beckoning gesture with both hands. It looked up at me but then abruptly turned away again.

I followed it. I knew I would probably get in trouble for running in the halls, but I was maybe a little overexcited from the feeling of release after finishing my homework. The cat swerved out of the hallway and slipped through a gap into the garden. We didn't have a lot of open spaces in the house, but the cats knew a lot of shortcuts.

When I put my shoes on and went outside to follow after it, I found the cat right away. Or so I'd thought.

"Huh?"

On second glance, I realized it was actually the other cat, the piebald. This one, too, ran quickly through the garden, as if it had traded places with the tortoiseshell at some point. I didn't mind. When I chased after anything that moved, I felt almost like I had become a cat, too.

As I dashed after it through the trees, I spotted my grandmother, who was looking over the garden by herself. She bent over when she noticed the cat and opened her arms, inviting the piebald cat to her. In response, it strolled over and settled comfortably into her arms. My grandmother stood back up, still holding the cat, and her gaze fell on me.

My grandmother looked tall to me, although it might have been because she always stood so perfectly straight. Her eyes were sharp, like she was careful not

to show anyone her weaknesses.

“Looks like she’s taken a liking to you,” she remarked.

“But it ran away from me.”

“I was talking to the cat.”

Old as she was, my grandmother’s voice was loud and easy to hear.

She was right, though. Until they came to live with us, I hadn’t really been interested in cats. Now that I had seen them up close and been around them, though, I felt differently. When I reached out my hand, the cat turned away, even though it had been playing with me moments ago. Cats were fickle creatures, it seemed.

“Don’t you have lessons?”

“No, not today.”

“My, that’s unusual,” my grandmother said. The cat stared at me from its position in her arms. I stood there for a while, looking back at the cat.

Even in the shade, it wasn’t cool outside by any standard. The cicadas’ cries slid from the trees like falling raindrops. Though they were really loud, and my grandmother’s hearing hadn’t gone yet, she didn’t seem to notice it at all. The greenish-yellow light from the branches reflected in my grandmother’s eyes.

“Aren’t you going to go out to play with your friends?”

“No, I was too busy working on homework to make plans.”

“You’re too well-behaved, dear.” My grandmother’s mouth softened a bit. Seen in profile, it added more wrinkles to her face. “No wonder they go around bragging about their beloved daughter.”

“Who does?”

“Your mother and father.”

When she said *mother* she raised the cat’s left foot, and when she said *father* she raised its right. The cat mewed unhappily at being used as a prop for the conversation.

“I’ve never heard them say that.”

“Well, it’d be embarrassing to say it directly to you, wouldn’t it?”

My grandmother sounded detached. I was about to disagree but then thought about how it would feel to hear someone say that about you. Then I also thought about how it might feel to say that to someone directly. If I told one of the kids in my class, “*You’re the best friend anyone could ever have,*” I’m sure it would cause a great deal of embarrassment for everyone involved.

“I guess you might be right.”

“You pick up on things quickly.” My grandmother muttered something softly, but the cicadas drowned it out with cries as loud as a waterfall, so it never reached me. “But the faster you pick things up, the more cowardly you’ll become.”

I couldn’t tell exactly who she was addressing.

My grandparents looked after me on weekdays, just like they took care of the cats. My grandfather was soft, and my grandmother was sharp, or at least that was the image I had in my childlike brain. But my grandmother’s sharpness was never directed at those around her. It was like she needed to become smaller and more angular in order to protect herself. And to me, she was the very image of what an adult should be.

“You’re not going to play with your friends?”

“You already asked me that.”

“Even if you don’t go to them, you could bring them over here... You don’t bring your friends over much, after all. That raises some questions. Don’t you think so?” she added to the cat.

The cat stared out between the trees, uninterested in adding to the conversation. Its eyes might have been following the cicadas that sometimes batted their wings in the garden. *Does the cat have friends, too?*

It wasn’t as though I didn’t have any. My grandmother was probably worried that not playing with friends wasn’t very childlike of me. But that just meant I would become an adult faster, which didn’t seem like a bad thing.

“I’m busy with lessons after class.”

Besides, even if I wasn't very close to anyone at school, I had friends when I went to my lessons. The most recent friend I had made rose up with a splash from the pool in my mind, much to my annoyance.

"I know I'm the one who suggested them, but...are lessons really that fun for you?"

My grandmother gave me an uncertain look. I thought a little and then said, "Yeah. When I learn to do a lot of things, things get easier to understand, and I feel like I've grown up."

"Hmm. Mm-hmm." My grandmother took in a calm breath. Then she nodded and gave me some offhand praise. "Well, that's certainly very impressive. I'm the type who didn't really stick to anything, you see."

"Huh?"

"Oh, there you are." My grandfather had found us. Like my grandmother, he was also holding a cat in his arms as he came over. "Such a naughty little guy. I feel like I got in a whole year's worth of running chasing after this one."

He was out of breath. The tortoiseshell cat he held looked indifferent until it saw me and then seemed to grin.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I couldn't help myself..."

When my grandmother spoke coldly to him, my grandfather laughed. They were the only two people who actually took care of the cats. The maid looked after the house and the people but said that cats weren't in her job description. Still, I did see her preparing the cats' meals sometimes. That probably wasn't part of her job, either.

My grandfather took the white hat he wore off of his head and put it on mine. "You should wear a hat when you go outside."

Touching the hat lightly, I looked up at my grandfather. He looked down at me with round eyes, as did the cat. "Even if you only go out for a little bit. It doesn't matter whether you're in the yard or the streets—the sunlight outside is always the same."

“Yes, sir...” I mumbled. At times like this, I tended to try to sound polite. Maybe I was trying to seem older to them by acting humble.

“So, what were you talking about?” my grandfather asked, like he was trying to get us to let him join in. My grandmother and I looked at each other and smiled slightly.

“Just about how great our granddaughter is,” she responded.

“What? But that’s what you always talk about.” Grandpa sighed contentedly. As he swung the lower half of the cat’s body from side to side, it seemed to grimace at the heat.

I’m not sure I could’ve been any more embarrassed by how openly they were talking about me.

All I could do was look down and feel just a little bit proud.

Monday was ikebana. Tuesday was calligraphy. Then Wednesday was swimming.

When I went into the building that day, the girl was pressed to the window, looking down at the pool. Her jet-black hair swayed like seaweed behind her. I was thinking about ignoring her, but she immediately turned around.

“Oh, it’s my bestie Saeki-san!”

“Do you really need to say it like that?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the receptionist lady chuckling. I felt a little embarrassed. “Don’t say that so loud.”

“But you might not be able to hear if I say it too quiet!”

It’s not like I want to hear it. She seemed happy as she came up to me, grinning without a care in the world. “I’m just excited, that’s all.”

“Don’t you have other friends?”

“Uh, I do at school, yeah. But, I dunno, I’m happy that I get to be friends with *you*, Saeki-san.”

“Right...”

I remembered the conversation I had with my grandmother a few days ago. It really was embarrassing when someone said something like that to you outright—I had no idea how to respond. Unlike a grown-up, she had no tact at all.

As we passed by the vending machine, she turned around towards it. That drew my attention too, so I looked back to hear the machine droning and glittering, as always.

“Maybe later, I guess. More importantly, it seems like you’d have a ton of friends, Saeki-san.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you’re cute.”

She said it shamelessly, and I nearly turned away on sheer instinct. It felt as though all the air that had been in my lungs was rushing to my head. Trying to let it go without making a big deal about it, I slowly breathed out all that air.

“I’m actually quite bad at making friends.”

It’s easy to call someone a friend, but that doesn’t mean you value all of your friends equally. Some people might have really close friends, but they probably have just as many friends who don’t amount to much more than acquaintances.

All of my friends probably fell in the latter camp.

“Really?” she mumbled and then broke out into a smile, as if she’d just thought of something. “You should just fix the bad parts of you, then.”

“I don’t mind those parts of me, even if they’re bad.”

I was learning things that friends couldn’t teach me through books and grown-ups. That was much more valuable to me. I didn’t have enough time for both.

“Hmm?” She tilted her head like she didn’t understand at all. “Everything you say sounds so smart.”

“Sure.” I wanted to become a person who said smart things, so that was fine.

“You probably get really good grades on tests, right?”

She changed the subject almost immediately. No, wait, I guess we were still

talking about me. She appeared to want to get to know me, but I didn't understand why. Was it because we were friends? That seemed like putting the cart before the horse.

"I guess I do all right?"

I didn't know whether saying "yes, always" would have been acceptable, so I just answered vaguely. Even when I opened the door to the changing room and went inside, the girl just would not shut her mouth. The lighting inside the changing room seemed bright to my eyes, making me squint.

"I really admire smart people, 'cause I'm pretty dumb."

Talk about an unspeakably bad self-introduction. I opened my locker. Hers was four places over, putting a strange distance between us.

...Maybe I should say something back? I hesitated as I got my swimsuit ready. Finally, I decided I should probably at least try, so I opened my mouth.

"If you try your best, your test scores will work themselves out."

"You think so?" The girl wrinkled her nose. Then, she suddenly looked up. "Wait, I wonder if I just need to be more serious about that, too?"

"Maybe," I agreed, feeling more than a little worried about her future.

I finished changing ahead of the girl, who chattered the entire time. She stopped getting ready and stared straight at me. When my eyes met with hers, she got flustered and turned back to her locker. I felt a sense of déjà vu.

I wonder what that was about...

There was something mysterious about the way she sometimes looked at me, I thought as I headed towards the pool.

"Hey, wait up."

"What's the point of waiting for you when the pool is right over there?"

"Yeah, I guess so, but still."

It seemed like she was fighting with her shirt, which had gotten stuck to her back with sweat. I didn't have a reason to wait around for her, so I started going ahead.

“Waaaaait, bestiiaaie!”

Now I *really* had zero desire to wait for her.

When I got out to the pool, the humidity enveloped my skin all at once. Even with the air conditioning on, the mugginess always got worse by the pool. I walked to the side of the pool and looked up at the big windowpane overhead.

My eyes fell on the spot where the girl had been pressed up against it not long before. *I wonder what she was looking at from up there.* The only thing swimming in the empty pool was a bunch of ripples.

The girl came over right as I was showering off and kept hopping around as she got ready. I know this is weird for me to say, but she seemed really childish, or at least weirdly energetic. I guess she must have been in a good mood.

While I was putting on my swim cap and watching her, one of the instructors came over to me and addressed me quietly, with a curious glance toward the girl. “Saeki, did you say something to her?” He was probably referring to how she was actually listening to directions now.

“No, not really...” It was a white lie. I really hadn’t expected my words to have that much impact. “I thought maybe you gave her a warning, Sensei,” I added, even though I hadn’t really. I did think that would have made more sense.

The instructor answered with an honest, “No, it wasn’t me.”

I was a little taken aback. “But it’s a good thing, right?”

“Yeah...it’s just that I can’t really teach her at an intermediate level.”

“Huh?”

“Because her form is already so perfect.” The instructor scratched his head as though he were at a loss. Then he took a look at me and smiled. “Ah, but I definitely like it when kids listen to directions, of course.”

“Uh-huh...” He was trying to smooth things over for me. I guess that made him a good grown-up.

Her form is perfect. Those were nice words that I’d heard many times at my lessons but never during swimming class. That probably had less to do with whether I was well suited to swimming, and more with the fact that there was

someone else who was better than me all along.

During our swim instruction, I tried to follow the girl with my eyes. Whenever she started swimming, I sank underwater and watched her through my goggles. It probably looked a little suspicious, I suppose. I also watched her when we swam next to each other and when we passed each other. She would disappear ahead of me, always followed by bubbles.

But even after watching her the whole time, I couldn't figure out what it was about her form that was so perfect. It was just that her arms and legs moved nimbly. Like she had no trouble cutting through the water, her shoulders just naturally rotating to propel her forward. Maybe it was the way she never faltered.

Since I was watching her, our eyes met a lot. That meant she must have been looking at me, too. Whenever our eyes locked, she would smile at me and wave her hand, and I had no idea how to respond.

“.....”

Shoulder-deep in the water, I brought my left arm close to me as though I were cradling it. I could feel the distance between us—and it was growing. How much hard work on my part would it take to surpass her talent?

I had so many other lessons. The time I could spend on this was limited. I wasn't sure if I could overtake her at all, and even if I did hypothetically surpass her, there was a chance I would just be behind another person. If I had to just repeat that forever...

Maybe there was no security to be found in first place after all.

“Saeki-san, do you want something to drink?”

Right as I left the changing room, the girl came up beside me, like she had rushed to follow me.

“Wait. Your shirt...”

The bottom of her shirt was rolled up, exposing the right side of her stomach. Clearly, she'd been in a rush. Sighing, I reached over and tugged the shirt back

into place. She pushed her wet hair off her neck.

“Well? C’mon.” She spun around and made her way in front of me, then pointed at the vending machine in the hall.

“A drink?” I repeated.

“Which do you want?” Ignoring my question, she jumped right ahead to the next one.

“I’m fine... I don’t have money on me, anyway.”

As if she had anticipated this, the girl proudly stuck out her chest. Then she tapped the vending machine lightly, as if to say that I could just leave everything to her.

“It’s my treat.” For some reason, she looked pleased with herself, as though she was expecting me to be impressed. Her eyes sparkled brighter than the lights on the vending machine.

I accepted the challenge and used the school backpack she wore against her. “You’re not supposed to carry money around at school.”

“I’m not?” Her eyes went wide, like it was the first time she’d ever heard of such a thing. I had always assumed that it was a rule, and I thought I remembered someone telling me so, but maybe I was wrong. “C’mon, it’s fine,” she wheedled, giving me a friendly pat on the shoulder.

When she moved, a drop of water flew off her bangs and hit me in the face. I was getting vaguely annoyed. “No thanks.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t need you to treat me.”

I didn’t want to be in debt to this girl, or anyone else for that matter. Plus, if we started to do little things like this for each other, we might end up actually becoming close.

“Okay, um, then I’ll just buy a drink for myself, and you can have a little.”

The girl tugged on my sleeve to stop me from leaving. I didn’t know what to make of that, so all I could do was stop. “A little?”

“Yeah, or a lot, if you want.”

That’s not the problem.

I looked at the girl. The look on her face was clingy, pleading... She was basically making puppy-dog eyes at me. I wished the cats treated me like this.

My grandmother’s voice echoed in the back of my mind... *Right. Friends.* Breathing out a sigh, I sat down on the bench next to the vending machine. Realizing that this was my way of answering her, the girl broke into a smile.

“Are you okay with carbonation?”

“Sure.”

The girl pushed a button. Glancing over, I saw that the button she had picked was under a red paper carton.

“Isn’t that apple juice, though?”

“Yup.”

“Then why did you ask about carbonation?”

“I was just curious.” The girl sat down next to me. She stuck the straw in and drank a little before handing it to me. “Here you go.”

“Thanks...” I hesitated. This was my first time doing something like this with someone outside of my family.

The red carton in my hand was cold, but it felt nice. The straw had vertical blue stripes. I glanced at the girl, who looked back at me oddly, so I put the straw to my lips. Immediately, the sweet, tart taste filled my mouth. I was definitely thirsty after getting out of the pool, so the excessive sweetness was a welcome surprise. Even so, I took care not to drink too much of it.

As I gave the paper carton back to her, a small thought came into my mind, so I decided to ask about it. “Have you been swimming a long time?”

“Huh?”

“Because it seems like you’re really good at it.”

Although it took you long enough to listen to directions.

She took the juice back and answered, "I've been coming here for about a year now. I just like being in the water." Her eyes and mouth crinkled into a grin. There was a shine to her damp hair that looked nice with her tanned skin.

"Lately, I've been liking it even more." She leaned against the back of the bench and looked up, taking a deep breath and releasing it.

"I see."

"Want some more?"

I took the juice she offered, drank some, and gave it back. The cold sensation trickled down my throat, and as I took a breath, I felt myself calming down a little.

"Do you live nearby, Saeki-san?"

"It's about a fifteen-minute walk."

"Hey, that's pretty close. I bet your house is big, too."

I didn't really understand how those things were related, but she wasn't exactly wrong, either. I gave her a look that asked why she thought that.

"Cause you just kinda seem like a rich girl."

"Really...?" I wanted to ask what made her think that. But I remembered our front gate and that she was more or less correct. For one thing, as far as I could tell from conversations with my friends, it seemed like having a maid was unusual.

"Have you ever been to a family restaurant?"

"Are you making fun of me...?" I acted insulted, but the truth was that I really hadn't. My family had never taken me, so that was that. I had *seen* them before, of course.

"Summer vacation is coming up. Got any plans?"

She wasn't even drinking her juice anymore, just chatting away. Her expressions changed wildly from moment to moment.

"Homework and lessons."

"But isn't that what you always do?"

“Look, are you going to drink your juice or not?”

The girl looked down at the carton she was holding. She started to bring it up to her mouth but seemed to reconsider and pulled it away.

“You want some?”

“Just drink it,” I told her. She had bought it for herself, after all. But for some reason, her eyes wandered, as if she was nervous.

“Uh, right,” she answered vaguely. Her fingers fiddled with the carton, pushing it back and forth. “But once I finish drinking it...well, you know, right?”

“Know what?” I didn’t know what she was saying or what she was getting so hung up about.

The girl pouted unhappily. “Once I finish drinking it, you’ll probably go home.”

“Yes, of course I will.”

She brought her face closer to mine. The smell of chlorine hit my nose all at once.

“This is the only time I get to see you, so I wanted to talk about lots of stuff.”

I could clearly see her red tongue moving, a sharp contrast to her suntanned skin. She just wanted to talk to me. How long had it been since someone at school had come to me with such a request?

“Well, I...”

“Ahh, I wish I could go to the same school as you, Saeki-san.”

Before I could say anything, she drew back and stretched, releasing this lament. She wanted to be at the same school as me? I could easily imagine her coming up to me while I was studying and chatting endlessly. It was probably for the best that she couldn’t, I thought. But when her eyes met mine, she grinned, as if she didn’t realize how I felt about it at all. It was bright and friendly, sort of like the way my grandfather smiled.

But there was something more important than that, something I needed to ask her, no matter what.

“Listen, why do you like me so much?”

I hadn't known this girl for long. And we hadn't had a chance to get to know each other, so much so that this was the most we had ever talked to each other. The only sides of her I knew were how unserious she was and how she got uncomfortably close and acted like she knew me, and I honestly hated all of that about her. Or at least, I had until about two weeks ago.

Despite all that, she was clearly very fond of me. We seemed to have completely contradictory opinions of each other, so I couldn't help being curious.

When I asked her that, she looked down at her hands, which were wet from the condensation on the carton.

"Well, all this time..."

"Huh?"

The girl looked at me. I wasn't sure if she was aware of this, but her face and lips were screwed up tight, almost like she was in pain.

"Whenever I see you, my palms get all hot. It's been like that since the first time I saw you. And my back feels hot, too. I start to feel sweaty, and I can't seem to stop it. I don't feel like that when I see anyone or anything else, only with you, Saeki-san. So I always thought there must be something special about you."

The words spilled out all at once, as though she were exposing everything that had been pent up inside her. The part about feeling hot seemed to be true, because her cheeks were faintly red, like they were on fire.

She bent forward as if she was pleading for something. She was so close. My shoulders froze, like I'd been exposed to a strong headwind.

Those things the girl felt. I didn't have any personal experience with them, but I felt like I knew what they were. But it was an impossible combination. I mean, the person next to me was a girl, and so was I.

"Um, so, why d'you think I feel like that?" The girl leaned so far forward that she nearly pitched over, looking to me for an answer. *Don't ask me*, I thought.

"I'm not sure. I'm not the one who feels that way, so...I have no idea." I

turned my face away as I lied. I'm sure I wouldn't have known what it was if I were in her place, either.

"Right." The girl smiled meekly. "I thought you might know, since you're so smart."

"Don't be ridiculous. I might know a lot, but I still have lots and lots to learn."

For one thing, I hadn't realized that someone who seemed so close by was actually walking so far ahead of me. And the way she had bared her soul to me just now... I was starting to fear this girl more and more.

"Riiight," she mumbled again, looking up. Neither of us touched what was left of the juice. The girl swept her wet hair aside, tucking it behind her ear.

"I like being in the water," she said softly.

"You just told me that."

The girl giggled. "Well, if I'm in the pool, I don't feel as hot when I look at you."

With that, she closed her eyes, almost as though she were about to sleep. It was like she had said all she needed to say and was satisfied now. How selfish she was. I felt equal amounts of resentment and embarrassment bubbling up within me.

"....."

Is she being serious? Could she really be that oblivious?

Either way, facing her directly was too much right now. I couldn't move away, so I tilted my head down and looked away.

Now it felt as if the muscles in *my* neck were becoming hot, too.

A chill ran down my spine, filling my restless body with something like fear.

As I sat there, I could hear something joining the hum of the vending machine: a low murmur arising inside me because of the girl at my side. That something, which I couldn't quite pick out, was like the sound of waves on a wide, sandy beach. The indistinct sound took on a shape that was neither a triangle nor a rectangle as it tried to tell me something.

But I couldn't find the answer before it melted into the bubbling heat.

Just as I'd told the girl, I started off my summer vacation by doing homework.

Other than not going to school, my daily life didn't change much. I saw the maid more frequently, since she came in during the afternoon on weekdays. She was good at cleaning the house. Apparently, she had also been cleaning my room while I wasn't at home.

"If you decide you want to clean your room yourself instead, just let me know." She smiled, clearly hoping she wouldn't have to do as much work.

After finishing my homework, I filled my free time by studying other things. When I finished doing that, too, I grew bored and went to look for the cats. The tortoiseshell cat would usually run away, but the piebald cat had started to get used to me and would jump onto my lap from time to time. I pet its back, feeling like I was making definite progress.

What else are you supposed to do during summer break, I wonder? Whenever my mind wandered, I'd start thinking about silly things, and sometimes my thoughts would gravitate towards that girl.

She was a strange girl, I thought. That was basically my whole impression of her, other than the caution that wove itself into the back of my mind. If I kept looking right at her, it felt like I might see something entirely new. It was like I had seen into a part of myself I didn't know, as if I had gone underwater and couldn't go back. But I was probably just being paranoid.

I didn't know whether I wanted those changes to happen or wanted to run away from them. I wondered just how hot the palms of the girl's hands felt.

Then it was Wednesday. The one day I now couldn't help being painfully aware of.

When I headed out, it didn't feel like I was going to swim class so much as that I was going to see that girl. It wasn't about whether I liked her or not—it was more that I was being drawn towards her, somehow.

The cicadas were chirping along the road as always, the sun was strong, and

the clouds gathered overhead. Somehow, though, it felt like the sunlight was even whiter than usual. Everything seemed fuzzy around the edges. I couldn't make things out, even when I rubbed my eyes.

"Don't tell me..."

I touched the corner of my eye.

Had my eyesight gotten a bit worse? The image of the notes on my desk came to mind. Maybe I had abused my eyes so much that they now specialized in seeing things that were close to me at the cost of those that were farther away.

Because I had focused on making myself better, there were things about me that had gotten worse. It reminded me of the feeling of pushing my fingers down on both sides of a scale.

I arrived at the swimming class building. *I bet she's here.* Even before I went inside, I had a foreboding sense that she would be in the lobby again. The accumulating heat seemed to coil around my hair, so I shook it off as I went up the stairs.

It wasn't coincidence that I kept running into that girl at the entrance; she had been waiting for me there. Sure enough, she was pushing up against the window again. There was a chair right next to her, but she showed no interest in sitting in it. And, of course, she didn't have her school backpack on today.

I stared at her waiting back for a moment.

"Hello." I think this might have been the first time that I was the one to greet her.

"Oh, Saeki-san!" She turned around immediately.

The girl seemed genuinely thrilled as she came over to my side. As she waved innocently, I wondered if her palms were already hot. If her back had started to sweat. If she would eventually figure out what those feelings really were. And whether I wanted to know the full extent of them.

The girl stood next to me as though it were exactly where she belonged. The receptionist, I noticed, was watching us with amusement. I felt like she was wrongly assuming we were close. We weren't. At the very least, I didn't think

we had the kind of friendship that warranted someone staring at us and smiling.

“It’s so great being on summer vacation.”

“Is it?” As we headed to the changing room, I tilted my head at her. She seemed to want me to agree.

“I mean, I don’t really like school, anyway. Do you like school, Saeki-san?”

“Umm...”

When she put it that way, I supposed I didn’t dislike it. I never had to worry about being bored. I certainly had no idea what to do with myself during summer vacation.

We went into the changing room and stopped in front of the lockers like always, and she looked at me like she always did. She was watching me while I changed my clothes. Her gaze seemed to carry a different meaning to me now, and the awareness made my movements stiff. I tried my best not to show it, facing forward as I continued changing.

I locked the locker and, right as I turned to head to the pool, the girl cut in front of me. Of course, she hadn’t changed yet. She was still just looking at me.

“I’ll be there in a sec.”

“Sure.”

I passed her by. This was normal—just normal. We weren’t best friends forever or anything silly like that. And yet, she clearly considered me special.

The lesson started, and unlike in the changing room, I was the one following after her in the pool. I’d begun to recognize the difference in her superior swimming form. She didn’t learn from other people but still forged ahead. I was starting to realize that some people were just like that.

It did bother me, of course. But the coolness of the water placated me, calming me down.

I followed the instructor’s directions, doing laps back and forth across the pool. I made sure to move my body carefully in line with what I had been taught. As I came and went, I checked next to me, but I didn’t see her. Maybe she had passed me without my noticing. When I finished my lap, I touched my

hand to the wall and surfaced.

“Ah!”

When I brought my face out of the water, she was right next to me. Apparently, she had gone across the lanes at some point to enter mine. Her goggles were on her forehead, leaving her eyes exposed. They were slick with water, just like her skin.

“Wh-what is it?”

“You’re the one who was looking at me. I thought you needed something.”

I could feel the other kids’ eyes on us. *Should we really keep talking like this?*

“I was just admiring your swimming.”

I gave her a straightforward excuse, trying to get her to go back to her lane quickly. But she responded with an easygoing “Aww, shucks, really?” as if she was pleased to hear the compliment. It seemed like she really didn’t care about the other people around her. I suppose the only exception was me—because I made her feel hot.

“You’re good at swimming, too, Saeki-san.”

“...Thanks.”

“But I don’t think your arms are in the right position when you push through the water.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Try it like this...”

She reached over to grab my arm and show me how to position it. But then she stopped halfway and withdrew. The girl stared at her own hand. It was so sudden, it felt as though time had stopped all around us.

“Um, hello...?”

When I spoke to her quietly, she didn’t say anything but just splashed her way back into her own lane. She stopped looking at me after that, and I tried not to look in her direction, either. Instead, I focused on where my arms were when I paddled the water. It didn’t feel like I was going any faster.

After class ended and we said our goodbyes, I realized that the girl was still standing in place alone while everyone else went back to the changing room. Just as I was about to ask her what was wrong, she jumped into the deserted pool without hesitation.

SPLOOSH! She sent up a gigantic splash, like she had carved out a part of the water. The instructor came running back. “Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!”

When the instructor yelled at her, the girl came up to the surface. She floated there on her back, right in the middle of the pool. There she stayed, unmoving, completely ignoring the instructor’s warning. Looking closer, I realized that she had taken off her swim cap and goggles at some point, leaving them to float elsewhere in the pool.

“Just when I thought she was behaving...” The instructor sighed.

But I knew what was happening. It was something that no one but me could know. The girl’s entire body had probably become so hot that she just couldn’t help it.

“.....”

I wondered how hot she must feel.

I wondered if I would be able to tell even in the water.

“Saeki?”

The instructor’s voice stuck to the back of my head and then slipped off easily.

Though not as flashily as the girl had, I jumped off the edge of the pool and dove into the water, too. The loud sound of the water bubbling up surrounded my head. I thought of fixing my swim cap when it started slipping off, but then I remembered the girl’s cap and let the water take it. My goggles and cap came off just like hers, and all my hair was submerged in water, dragging me downward.

As I kicked off the pool wall and swam over to the center, my floating legs trembled. I moved them as though I was pushing away the water. The girl sank downward in a haze of bubbles, then changed direction and started swimming

over to me. I swam toward her, too, so we met in the middle before we ran out of air.

We were still underwater when our eyes met. Even without our goggles, the otherwise empty pool was still enough that we could see each other's faces clearly. Her eyes, which seemed to sparkle even underwater, captivated me. The bubbles quietly continued to rise up around us.

It was odd, but I didn't feel anywhere near out of breath.

We stared at each other, not attempting to speak. I wondered whether the instructor was angry with us on the surface. *Why did you come down here?* the girl's eyes seemed to ask me.

I came here to find out, I responded silently, letting out some bubbles. *To find out how hot your palms are.*

I took the girl's hand. That seemed to surprise her; she breathed out a whole bunch of bubbles. Kicking her feet to stay in position, she looked at the hand I had taken into mine. The colors of our hands contrasted, so even my faltering eyesight could see their outlines clearly.

Her hands really were warm, just like she said. The heat radiating off her palms seemed to beat with a steady pulse, almost thrumming against the water. Her fingertips tensed tightly against mine. The girl looked from our connected hands to my face and back, in this world where not even breath could reach us.

Then, with a relaxed expression that wasn't quite a smile, she took my other hand. With both our hands connected, our fingers intimately intertwined. I felt like my own hands might be getting hot, too.

The moment we shared was wondrous, like a perfectly spherical bubble that would pop at the slightest touch. It felt like a never-ending dream. But my need for air began to rise, as if to prove that it was just an illusion. I motioned with my eyes, asking if we could surface. Despite all the air she had lost before, the other girl still seemed fine. She shook her head slightly and brought her face close to mine.

What was she doing? I braced myself, but my hands were still in hers, so I

couldn't move to stop her.

The girl brought her face to the crook of my neck. I felt my skin breaking out into goosebumps, even though we were in the water. All at once, her lips were pressed against my skin. Then they moved ever so slightly, and I felt my head spinning like a whirlpool.



Something began to overflow from the space between her lips and my neck.

Bubbles rose in front of my eyes, along with a muddied burbling sound. Dizzied as I was, I finally realized what the girl was trying to do.

Air—she was trying to give me air.

So that we could be alone together, if only for a little longer.

Her bubbles brushed against my lips as they headed towards the surface.

I accepted them, as if breathing those bubbles into my own lungs.

In that moment, my heart cracked.

That was the only explanation I could think of for the sharp pain that ran through my chest. I could hear the sound clearly, as something seemed to break inside me.

Brushing off the girl's hands, I rushed to the surface. As I broke out of the water, the only thing that filled my ears was the sound of my own unsteady breathing. I held my chest with my hand. My anxious fingers shook, checking whether my chest had broken open.

What just happened?

The pain in my heart sent fireworks rushing past my eyes, and beyond them, I caught a glimpse of something else. Or was it the opposite? Had my heart cracked trying to suppress whatever that something was?

The girl also came up in a fluster. A little shriek nearly escaped my throat.

“Saeki-sa—”

I avoided the hand she stretched towards me and escaped to the pool's edge. Scrambling up and out of the pool, I slipped past the instructor, ignoring whatever he was trying to say, and ran up the stairs. I didn't even dry off my drenched body or face as I pulled my bag out of the locker, just focused entirely on tearing off my swimsuit so I could change into my clothes. The gross feeling of the fabric sticking to my wet skin barely registered as I ran out of the

changing room.

I realized partway through this process that my swim cap and goggles were still in the pool, but I didn't even consider going back to get them. Instead, I threw the key down on the reception desk and didn't even wait to get my card back before leaving the building behind me.

Just like that, I ran away. A fresh wave of fear shook my body when I thought I heard the sound of footsteps chasing after me, but I didn't slow down.

The summer sunlight didn't seem to reach me, as though the water were preventing it from getting to my skin. Something pitch-black was weighing down on me.

What had I seen? What was it that I had accepted—that made my breath leap until I couldn't breathe at all—that had terrified me? *What was that? What was that?* My thoughts spun wildly.

The goosebumps wouldn't go away, and my spine still trembled. A wintry chill that I couldn't seem to shake off filled my body. The feeling of her lips on my neck still clung to my skin, in spite of the water droplets that dripped around it.

I was practically flying along the ground as I ran, my vision bouncing up and down dizzily. There was something else behind the bubbles that I had just inhaled. Something I was not yet allowed to know. My childish knowledge and limited experience could not begin to approach it. Only my deepest instincts suspected its identity.

The manifestation of that feeling, which I could only represent with crude triangles and squares, was simply terrifying to me. Gripped by fear, all I could do was run away.

The only thing I knew with certainty was that I must never see that girl again.

That evening, I made sure both my parents were present before I cleared my throat and spoke.

"I want to quit swimming. It's just not right for me."

This was the first time I had told them I wanted to quit anything. Nervous, I

waited for their response.

My dad briefly mumbled, “Uh-huh,” and my mother simply said, “Really? I suppose these things do happen.” Not a single scolding or objection. They just accepted it right away.

I had given up on something for the first time, but they forgave me. Maybe my belief that I lived in a respectable house and needed to behave accordingly was all just in my head? I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was drifting, as though I had thrown myself into the water and was just floating there.

I didn’t understand anything anymore.

After that, as I was walking through the hallway to my room, I accidentally touched my own hand. There was a warmth burning within it that was entirely separate from the summer heat. I left my hands pressed together, waiting until it disappeared.

As I tilted my face downward to look at them, something slipped from the surface of my drooping bangs. Like a droplet of water had fallen from my hair, even though it was no longer wet.

It crept along my skin, tracing its way down to the still-lingering sensation on my neck.

I don’t often think about the events of elementary school. Perhaps it’s been so long now that I simply forgot about it somewhere along the way.

But even if so much time has passed that I no longer remember much, it will never truly disappear.

The memories, the warmth—all of it.

Saeki Sayaka:
Class 2-C, Tomosumi Girls' Academy

“SAYAKA-CHAN.”

I turned around when I heard my first name, which didn't happen often at school.

It was an upperclassman from the choir club. I always called her Yuzuki-senpai, so I didn't actually know her first name. Mine, on the other hand, rolled off her tongue quite naturally. On top of that, she had even added a *-chan* to the end of it.

I was a little bit miffed by this. It didn't sound right to my ears.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. I saw you, so I called your name, that's all.”

Her tidy hair, not quite long enough to reach her shoulders, fluttered faintly. There was no ulterior motive behind her bright smile—it seemed she really had just called out to me for the sake of it.

Something about that reminded me of swimming lessons.

How was I supposed to respond in times like these? Saying, “*Oh, I see,*” would seem too curt and unfriendly. Maybe it would be best for me to just smile ambiguously, as if nothing had happened? When I gave that a try, her eyes went wide for a moment, but she immediately started smiling again.

“You're headed to the club room, right?”

“Yes.”

She came to stand by my side, presumably indicating she would go with me. I don't think you could say that Yuzuki-senpai and I were close, nor that she ever particularly looked out for me. She was in the grade above me, and we'd been in the same club ever since I joined in April of my first year, but that was all. Even when I went out with friends, it was always with students in the same

grade as me, so I'd never once seen her outside of school.

Still, there was something about her that felt different from the other upperclassman. As if there was something separating her from them.

"So, have you heard?"

"About what?"

The light coming into the corridor from the window that day was serene and pleasant. You'd never guess it was June from the lack of humidity. My hands and arms felt light as they moved.

"People have been saying you're going to be the next president, Sayaka-chan."

I take that back. When she said that so casually, my entire body grew heavy. The pit of my stomach sank, as if the rest of my body might leave it behind as I tried to move forward.

"Why me?" I acted doubtful, but the truth was that I'd been getting the feeling that this might happen for a while now.

"Well, you're so on top of things, for one."

"I don't know about that..."

I didn't feel like I had been on top of things at all when it came to choir activities. The upperclassmen in choir already had things well in hand, so it wasn't as though I had no choice but to take the lead. But even that would change after this summer.

Yuzuki-senpai, on the other hand, was dreamy—mostly in the way she spoke and acted. If a strong wind came by, I could picture her unraveling like a ball of cotton.

There were a lot of people like that around here. The overall mood of the school was slightly different from what I'd imagined when I first enrolled.

"I'm counting on you, too, Sayaka-chan."

When she told me that with a friendly smile, I didn't sense any ill will. I nearly let it win me over, but there was something that gave me pause.

“But I’m an underclassman.” As my upperclassman, she ought to be the one I could count on.

Her eyes gently wandered away. “Hmm... But that only means I was born a year earlier than you. What’s important is how that year was spent.” She nodded to herself, looking satisfied. I felt like we weren’t quite seeing eye to eye on this conversation.

And yet, she was casually calling me Sayaka-chan. Perhaps because this place had a reputation as a “rich-girl school,” it wasn’t unusual for upperclassmen to call underclassmen by their first names, and to add a *-chan* to the end. That never felt right to me, so I called everyone alike by their last name with a *-san*. I was worried at first that it would alienate them, but it didn’t seem to be causing any problems so far.

I didn’t have anyone I was on a first-name basis with other than my family. Maybe I’d meet someone like that someday, but it didn’t seem like it would happen anytime soon. This combined junior high and high school was girls-only, for one thing.

My eyes met with my own faint reflection in the window. When I looked down, I felt like my gaze met with that of my elementary school self, too.

Time had passed, and I was a proper thirteen-year-old now: a junior high student. I commuted three stations from my house to Tomosumi Girls’ Academy, and I even wore a school uniform. There was always a cool, collected look on my face when I walked through the hall, as though I were one of the adults.

Going to school by train was a lot more trouble than I had thought it would be. I had shunned the local schools and chosen one far away because of my family’s recommendation. In a way, though, it felt like a godsend. I had been somewhat reluctant to see that girl again in junior high.

“.....”

I used junior high as an opportunity to quit most of my many extracurricular activities. The only ones I kept were the ikebana lessons because my grandparents wanted me to continue. I told my parents that I wanted to quit the rest in order to spend my time studying for school, and they accepted it. It

was the truth, but I was also reaching the limit of how long I could keep ahead of everyone else in so many different fields. I had been gauging my abilities based solely on whether I was winning or losing against others, but now I knew that you couldn't get ahead just by mindlessly pushing forward.

I wasn't sure whether that meant my outlook had expanded or if I had simply given up because I couldn't see what was ahead of me anymore. *I wonder if my elementary school self would be satisfied with who I am now.*

We arrived at the music room that served as the choir clubroom. I could hear loud sounds from within, and when I opened the door, I found that they were in the middle of moving the desks aside. One of the underclassmen greeted me as she worked, so I gave her a simple greeting in return.

"See, Sayaka-chan? Everyone really does count on you," Senpai said.

"All I did was say hello..."

Still, I laughed a little at Senpai's joke.

I chose the choir club because it was low commitment. I didn't need an instrument, and I could do it alone. Besides, though I knew how to play the piano, I didn't have much experience with singing. Even if I was no longer putting on a bold front like I had in elementary school, it didn't hurt to gain some new skills.

I was slightly late, so they had already almost finished preparing everything for the day.

"I'm only going to be able to see you here for a little bit longer," Senpai said as she looked at the empty space where the desks had been. Then, she turned to look at me.

"Senpai?" I was at a loss. She looked a bit awkward too, despite being the one who said it in the first place, as she scrunched up her eyes and smiled.

"Let's give it everything we've got."

"Right..."

Her voice sounded a little weak to me, as did my own.

She might have wanted to say something else, but I had no way of telling at

the time. Just like in math, there are some things that just can't be solved until you learn the right formula.

There were about twenty people in the choir, about half of whom were third years; only three were first years. The choir would probably have trouble surviving in two years, I thought. According to our advisor, the choir club was in a perpetual cycle of dying out and being revived. There was a chance it might disappear again by the time I graduated.

Still, choir was pretty refreshing. It demanded something different compared to my lessons from elementary school, which were always about simply making myself better than the rest. In choir, I had to be aware of whether I was in harmony with those around me. I wasn't planning to apply myself too intensely to choir activities, so I was careful not to draw too much attention to myself.

Under the club advisor's supervision, we all sang the parts we were given for our daily exercise. During that time, I looked around at the faces of the club members, checking in on my classmates and the underclassmen in particular. Partway through, my eyes met with Yuzuki-senpai, who smiled at me. Feeling a bit awkward, I nodded to her in response.

President, huh? Thinking of the approaching responsibility, I heaved a little sigh.

"Are you coming, too, Saeki-san?" another club member asked me while we did some light cleaning and put the music room's desks back in place.

"Why, are you going somewhere?"

"We finished early today, so I was thinking maybe we could grab something light to eat. Right?" She turned to another girl, who nodded in silent agreement.

I did turn them down last time, I thought. "Maybe I'll come along, then," I said aloud and then checked the time. "I have to catch my train, though, so I might need to leave early."

"Yeah, that's fine!"

My classmates and I put the desks back into position. I brushed dust off my

hands and sighed. At some point, bringing money to school had stopped being a bad thing.

I turned my gaze out the window, where the clear skies from the afternoon still persisted. With the strong sunlight lasting later into the day, it felt like the curtain of the season was steadily rising. Summer would arrive before long.

“So you’re going, too?”

“Wah!” I exclaimed in surprise when a voice spoke to me out of the blue. At some point, Senpai had appeared over my shoulder. I hadn’t noticed her approaching me at all, so it felt almost as though she had grown right out of the floor.

“I never would’ve expected that. I thought you were kind of stuffy.”

“What kind of impression do you have of me, exactly?”

Although I might have been a little too straitlaced in grade school.

“Hmm, I see. So you *are* going.”

“Senpai?”

She nodded and then peered at me with innocent eyes unbefitting of an older student. “Is there room for one more?”

“You mean *you*, Senpai?” I realized that my eyes had gone wide at the unexpected request.

“Is that a no?”

“No...I just wasn’t expecting it.”

“See, you’ve got the wrong idea about me, too. *J’accuse!*”

She pointed at me. I wasn’t surprised about *that*—it was just that I hadn’t expected an upperclassman to want to hang out with younger students. I always assumed it was normal for students to group together based on their years, and judging by the way things normally went, that assumption wasn’t wrong. So maybe it wasn’t unexpected so much as a little unusual.

“It’s fine with me, but I’ll have to ask the others.”

Senpai’s face lit up. “Great! Thanks.”

It wasn't even set in stone yet, but she looked cheerful as she went back to cleaning up.

She was going because I was going...? But why?

I had met a girl like that once before...but this couldn't be like that.

"Yuzuki-senpai said that she also wanted to go."

When I told the classmate from earlier that, her eyes went wide. "Senpai?"

"I know. I didn't expect it either."

"Everyone's just full of surprises today."

"Yeah, I thought she was too proper for that."

"She is kind of easygoing, though," my classmate weighed in. I agreed with her impression.

Normally, when an upperclassman mingled with underclassmen, the underclassmen ended up feeling self-conscious. But there was something carefree about Yuzuki-senpai, so perhaps it wouldn't be an issue. If it had been the president or someone authoritative, my classmates would probably have been miserable.

So, in a rare turn of events, we ended up hanging out after school with an upperclassman among us.

Because I always walked from the school gate straight to the station, going in a different direction almost gave me the illusion that my vision was expanding—the town in the daylight, the people coming and going endlessly, the unfamiliar scenery. More likely than not, I would end up going through junior high and high school without knowing much about anything outside of the school.

My stomping grounds were more limited than when I had been in tons of lessons as an elementary school student. Thinking of it that way, I couldn't help feeling that the thirty-minute train ride to school really was too long. But it seemed as though most adults were always traveling between work and home, so maybe that was just how life went.

Senpai was walking beside me. I looked at her from the corner of my eye and realized that our eyes were more or less at the same level. The great difference

between our heights had shrunk quite a bit since I first joined the club.

As usual, hot steam was rising from the front of the *manju* seller's store on the corner. Along with my classmates, we turned that corner, crossed the street, and headed to a fast food place on the right side of the road. It was the same place we had gone to last time.

The place used to be small, but they'd remodeled and expanded the seating to the second floor at some point, or so a classmate who lived nearby had told me. As we approached, I looked casually at Senpai. She had a timid look on her face, and her eyes were shifting around, as if distracted by some anxiety.

"Is something the matter?" I asked, thinking that she might have forgotten something at the school.

"Oh, no. It's nothing...nothing at all."

She shook her head, evading my question. It didn't seem like it was actually nothing, but I walked into the fast food place for the time being. If she was worried about something, I could ask her about it once we sat down. It really didn't feel like how you were supposed to treat an upperclassman at all, which I admit amused me a little.

It wasn't even July yet, but the air conditioning inside the restaurant was already on. At least half of the seats on either wall, leading up to the counter in the back, were taken. A group of students in a different uniform were going up the stairs to the second floor.

I had come here countless times, but my ears could never get used to how lively it sounded. Wondering how Senpai was doing, I looked to the side.

"Senpai?"

For some reason, she had shrunk, ducking her head down low. She glanced around as though she was frightened.

"So, um, Sayaka-chan..." She beckoned me closer, even though she was right next to me. How much closer was she expecting me to get to her?

"Could you lend me an ear?" she requested in a tiny voice.

"Huh?" Obediently, I brought my ear closer to her. Her voice shook anxiously

as she leaned in to whisper to me.

“It’s my first time coming to a place like this.”

“I see...”

My strange impression of her might have actually been right, I thought. So that was why she looked so anxious.

“What am I supposed to do?”

“What are you supposed to... Well, you order like normal...”

“What’s normal?”

“You order over there, pay for it, and pick it up.”

I stealthily pointed at the counter. My classmates had stopped in a random spot in the middle, waiting for us.

“It’s the same as a bookstore or a convenience store...have you been to any of those before?”

“Obviously I’ve been to places like *that*.” Her voice sounded a little sulky now. She stuck out her bottom lip, which I thought was kind of cute.

At the same time, I hadn’t started coming to places like these until I started junior high, either. I was probably just as nervous then.

My classmates were backtracking to us now, having evidently gotten tired of waiting.

“We’re just going to order all together. Are you okay with fries and a drink?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Yuzuki-senpai, how about you?”

“Y-yes, please.” She nodded sheepishly.

As I watched her overflowing with uncertainty, I ended up feeling a little embarrassed. I must have come off this way during my first time at the *manju* place, too.

Senpai checked in with me again in a hushed voice. “French fries are just fried potatoes, right?”

“Yes, that they are.” It was difficult to hold back my laughter.

Before long, she received her tray and stared at the counter as she muttered, “So you pay first...”

“Huh?”

“Uh, nothing.”

Pretending like nothing had happened, she took a seat. The two seats across from her were filled by my two classmates, so I ended up sitting next to her. I was the one who knew her best out of our group, though, so I guess that was how things would have turned out anyway.

We had our school bags between us as we sat side by side. After staring intently for a while at the fries that peeked out of her paper bag, she somewhat cautiously brought one to her lips. She nodded thoughtfully as she chewed, and after swallowing, murmured, “Well, the *taste* is quite normal.” *Which part* isn’t *normal, then?* I wondered.

Despite that, we started some friendly conversation—or not. There wasn’t much in common to talk about between me, my classmates, and our senpai. We couldn’t even talk about homework with her around, since she was in a different grade. The only common topic that was left was the choir club. But most of us weren’t even all that passionate about the club, so there wasn’t much to talk about there, either.

Maybe things would pick up if we gossiped about the other members of the club? But there wasn’t really any reason to talk about that.

In the end, we naturally gravitated towards talking to the person who was next to us. My two classmates were friends, so they were happy to chat amongst themselves, and Senpai and I...well, I didn’t know whether we were close enough for that, but it wasn’t as though I couldn’t talk to her.

“Do you go out to places like this a lot, Sayaka-chan?” She was glancing around the place, her inexperience painfully obvious.

“Not alone, no. And I don’t really go out that much in the first place.”

“Hmm...so what do you do on your days off?”

“Hard to say. They always seem to end before I know it.” Since I had started reading books on the train to and from school, I didn’t have much left to read on weekends.

I picked at my fries, and she ate one too, as if following suit. Then, she wiped her fingers on the paper. She must have been a stickler for cleanliness, since she always immediately wiped her fingers as soon as they got dirty.

“You’re not taking extracurricular lessons or anything, Sayaka-chan?”

“I used to take a lot of them, but I’m just doing ikebana right now...”

“So you’re working with flowers. Do you change into a kimono for that?”

“No, not every time.” The first flower arrangement of the year was probably the only time we wore kimono.

“Aww, really?” She seemed disappointed as she put her lips to her straw. I didn’t know why she would be, though.

“So then, Sayaka-chan, are you...”

She kept asking me all kinds of things about myself. It felt like I was being interrogated. I thought of several things I wanted to ask her too, but she never gave me a chance.

Come to think of it, this might be the most we’d ever talked in one sitting. Until now, we had only seen each other at club, said hello to each other, and had a few passing conversations.

“Are you doing okay on time, Saeki-san?”

My classmate considerately checked in with me. I took a glance at the restaurant’s clock and answered, “I’m fine for now.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Senpai said, as if our exchange had just reminded her. “You go home by train, don’t you, Sayaka-chan? That’s so grown up.”

“You think so?” Senpai certainly didn’t look much like an adult, with the way she was grinning. “Once you get used to it, it’s just tedious. You usually have to stand in the middle of a big crowd.”

“I think that you saying it’s tedious is what makes it so grown up.”

Is it? I almost tilted my head at her. Even kids think tons of things are tedious—I certainly used to, at least.

“Sometimes you seem so grown up, Sayaka-chan.”

“Do I really?”

“If you were the same age as me, I bet I could have relied on you even more.”

“Ha ha ha...” I laughed lightly, humoring her joke. But Senpai wasn’t really laughing.

“I wish we could had been in the same year...” she lamented, in a delicate voice that seemed to disappear into nothing.

I wondered what she would have called me if we really had been in the same grade.

Though she acted casual, she was still a real third year. Her grade would retire from choir club before summer vacation. Just like the other clubs, it was tradition for third years to leave early, since they couldn’t participate in any future competitions.

I would only see her in the music room for one more month. At the time, at least, my only thought was that the music room would feel a lot bigger once she was gone.

As time went on, Senpai flooded me with more questions. Perhaps she was only quizzing me so much because we didn’t have anything else to talk about. We didn’t know much about each other to begin with, so we had to change that if we were going to have any deeper conversations.

Senpai was the last to stand up, observing how we cleaned up after ourselves before doing the same.

As I watched her imitate us, Senpai noticed my gaze and pouted slightly. “What?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

I headed for the exit, smiling slightly.

I hadn’t gotten to ask Senpai about herself at all, in the end. But I had seen

her cuter side in action.

“A closing party?”

Halfway through July, the president called me over just as we were about to finish our club activities. She wanted to talk about celebrating the third years' retirement by planning a closing party. I didn't remember the past year's third years having one when they retired. It didn't seem to be tradition or anything like that.

“What did you want to do for it, exactly?”

“Oh, I figured we'd just go out to eat and then do karaoke.”

“Karaoke...” Because we were the choir club, I supposed. Even though I knew the word, I still felt a little cautious.

“I think we'd be out too late if we go after school, so I was planning on having everyone get together Saturday or Sunday. But you've got a long way to go by train, right, Saeki? What would you prefer?”

“Hmm...”

I hesitated a little. It was the third years' retirement party, not ours, after all. It didn't seem like the president was going to force me to go, either. “You can let me know tomorrow,” she told me as she walked away, I wondered what to do as I picked up my bag.

“I'd be so happy if you came, Sayaka-chan.”

“Wah!” I wasn't quite as shocked as when it had happened last time, but Senpai had appeared out of nowhere again.

“Won't you come out and have fun with us?”

“...Senpai, don't tell me...”

I felt like I had experienced this particular sequence of events before.

“It's just...you know.” As Senpai faltered, and then continued in a hushed voice, my sense of déjà vu intensified. “The truth is, Sayaka-chan...”

“You've never been to karaoke before, right?”

When I predicted what she was about to say, Senpai frowned grumpily. But then she sighed. “No, I haven’t.”

“Where exactly *have* you been before, Senpai?”

I asked her that as a joke, but to my surprise, she thought about it seriously. Then, her gaze started to drift away.

“Convenience stores?”

“Then you’ll be fine.”

I think. The truth was, I hadn’t gone to karaoke before, either.

“I’d be sooo happy if you came, though, Sayaka-chan.” She grinned, her smile pointed right at my face like the barrel of a gun.

“You *just* told me that.”

“I’m nervous, all right?”

Even now, she seemed like she was about to latch on to the sleeve of my uniform. Was it somehow less scary if I was around? I was starting to grow concerned about what she thought I was.

“Karaoke is, well...you just have fun singing there. It’s the same as choir club.”

I hadn’t gone before either, so I was purposefully vague. I knew there was a karaoke place in front of the station, and I occasionally saw girls in school uniforms go into it. I more or less thought of it as a place that had nothing to do with me, though, so I never really paid attention. I suspected that it was probably the same way for Senpai, too.

“Ooh, I want to sing with you, Sayaka-chan.”

Senpai suddenly lit up, as though she had discovered her saving grace.

“Aren’t we always singing together?”

“Yeah, but that’s over now.” She straightened up from her usual slight slouch, which made her height just a bit taller than mine. “This might be the last time I get to do anything with you, Sayaka-chan.”

“.....”

That's such an unfair card to play, I thought.

People have a weak spot when it comes to endings. Nothing motivates people to prioritize things more than knowing they won't ever happen again. If I were to try to ignore her, I'd end up feeling strange and restless, as though something were being taken from my heart.

"I suppose if I don't have anything I need to do at home..."

I relented a little, exposing a bit of weakness as I gave an indecisive answer.

When I really thought about it, I didn't have any reason not to go, other than that it was slightly inconvenient. If something as silly as that was making me drag my heels, then maybe going for Senpai's sake wasn't such a bad reason.

In the end, I ended up attending the closing party because of Senpai's invitation.

Through the haze of sleep, I heard some sort of skittering sound. Listening with my eyes still closed, I realized it was the sound of rain. *It's raining, huh...* It took a moment before the information really sank in. When it finally did, I sat up with a start.

Getting out of bed and opening the curtain, I saw rain pelting down hard on the trees in the garden.

"This is terrible."

Of course this would happen on the one day I was actually planning to go out.

I tuned in to the weather report on the news. When I heard that the rain was unlikely to let up, I felt a lead weight settling over me. It felt like my bangs and eyelashes were already soaked with rain, even though they had yet to feel a drop.

This is such a drag. The negativity that I thought I had dispelled reared its ugly head again.

As I sighed, a cat peeked into my room from the hallway beyond the sliding door. It looked at me, so I looked back at it, but then it immediately lost interest and wandered away.

If I were still in elementary school, I probably would have gone after the cat right away. But now I just watched it leave. What about me had changed, other than my height? How had time transformed my identity?

Well, the urge to stay inside on rainy days certainly hasn't changed, I thought as I absentmindedly took in the scene.

Regardless, I got ready and put on my shoes.

“Are you going out?”

Standing at the front entrance with the cat in her arms, my grandmother called out to me. Those cats were always on their best behavior with my grandmother. Maybe they understood who their owner was.

“Yeah, for club stuff.”

“Don't stay out too late.”

“Okay.”

She sounded more like a mother than a grandmother. I took an umbrella off the shelf and told her, “I'll be off, then.”

Since it was such a rainy Saturday, I didn't pass many people on the way to the station. I felt strange without the weight of my school bag in my hands or the scarf from my school uniform swinging at my chest, and cold water splashed my ankles from time to time. The sticky heat that was characteristic of summer in Japan gradually surrounded my body, only compounding my discomfort.

The sound of the rain was very different under the umbrella than it was all around me. Outside the umbrella it was harsh, but underneath, it sounded quieter. It was like slowly forcing my way through a waterfall.

When I got to the station, I went through the ticket gate as always and boarded a train that had just arrived at the platform. There were significantly fewer people riding on the train compared to weekdays during prime commuting hours, and the air conditioning inside of the train car was working all the better for it. I felt relieved. It had been a while since I had been able to get a seat on the morning train.

I opened the book I had brought with me to pass the time until my arrival,

wondering when I had last traveled in a group. It might have been during an elementary school trip. *Where did we go back then, anyway?* As my thoughts wandered, the words seemed to drift off the page, eluding my focus.

Before I could quite recall everything, the train arrived at my stop. I closed the book and got off of the train.

We had agreed to gather in front of the station. As I went through the ticket checker wondering where they would be, someone immediately called to me.

“Sayaka-chan!” Senpai waved her hand at me, gesturing to the others. A group of my fellow students was gathered next to a large square pillar.

After I bowed in greeting, Senpai walked over to collect me, wearing casual clothes instead of a school uniform. Her smile made it seem like I was the only one she had really wanted to see. She approached me with such momentum that I thought for a moment she was going to grab my hand at once.

“Wow, you’re not in uniform, Sayaka-chan.” She broke out into a smile, looking grateful. ...Wait, *grateful*? Well, regardless, she was certainly happy. “It’s my first time seeing you in casual clothes.”

“You, too, Senpai.”

She wore a plain shirt printed with cute English letters, but they were so stylized that I couldn’t read them.

“You look even more grown up out of your uniform.”

For some reason, Senpai was acting almost like she was proud of the sight of me. It wasn’t like *she* had picked my clothes. I wondered what that was about as I gave the same answer again. “You, too, Senpai.”

She probably could have passed for a high school student in that moment. It reminded me that she really was older than me.

We headed over to join everyone else. It wasn’t just third years at the meeting location—I saw second years like myself, and even first years. It seemed just about everyone had come in the end; if I had been the only absentee, it might have looked bad. Senpai’s invitation had ended up saving me.

“Looks like everyone’s here, so let’s head over.”

The president led the way. The third years were at the front, then the second years, then the first; we solidified into a neat little line as we went. Senpai was with the third years, of course, but she was towards the back and walking alone. Occasionally, my eyes met hers as she looked over her shoulder.

“Where are we going?” I asked another second year next to me.

She tucked her hair behind her ear as she spoke. “A family restaurant near the karaoke place, they said.”

A family restaurant, huh? I imagined a bright, flamboyant sign that was far too easy to spot.

Of course, the rain poured down on us as we walked from the station to the family restaurant. Our raised umbrellas were mismatched with all kinds of colors and patterns. From above, they might have looked like blooming flowers all moving in a straight line. That struck me as a rather unnerving image.

The restaurant was less than a five-minute walk from the station. The back of the station was in the opposite direction from school, so it was the first time I had seen the place. The entrance was somewhat cramped, the restaurant nestled in a gap between buildings and up a flight of stairs.

I closed my umbrella. While the third and second years flowed inside one after another, Senpai came to stand next to me away from that flow.

“So, Sayaka-chan...”

“It’s your first time, isn’t it?”

“It sure is.”

This was the third time it had happened, so Senpai’s smile was more sheepish than ever. Senpai had always given a youthful impression, and by now I could more or less guess the reason. It was as if Senpai had been born in the exact image of what a sheltered rich girl would be.

In my mind, I silently responded: *Mine, too*. My working parents were seldom both at home, so we rarely had the opportunity to go out to eat as a family.

For the time being, I tried to keep myself from staring around more than

Senpai as we went up the stairs. The inside of the restaurant was bright, as though it were isolated from the overcast skies outside. It was packed with rows and rows of booth seating, just like the restaurants I had seen on TV. My eyes started to wander, but I restrained myself.

Outside the window was the pouring rain and the worn-out, gray building next door. It almost looked like a decal had been applied to the glass.

Since it was so bright, it felt as if there was nowhere to hide or catch your breath, which I found unsettling. As we started to choose empty seats according to class years, Senpai remained by my side. Grade levels didn't matter to her, it seemed. I was about to say something, but Senpai just smiled softly at me, so I ended up biting my tongue.

I tried my best to keep my terror from showing on my face as we nervously placed our orders. Our choir club took up nearly half the seats in the rather small restaurant. Perhaps that was why the jumble of sounds all around me seemed so loud. I heard Senpai's voice alone, as though it were on an entirely different wavelength from the others.

"So you have a cat at home, Sayaka-chan?"

"We have two, a tortoiseshell and a piebald."

At some point, we ended up talking about my home. Senpai still just wanted to ask all about me and my life.

"Are they cute?"

"Yes. Especially now that they're friendlier than they used to be."

Although I still thought they were cute even when they didn't like me before.

"Hmm." Her reaction was ambiguous. Her eyes shifted to the left, as though she were thinking.

"Do you not like cats?" I asked.

"Hmm, well...I'm just bad with animals and stuff."

"Bad with them?"

"I can never tell what they're thinking. I guess I might be avoiding them

because of that.”

That seemed unexpected coming from Senpai, considering how carefree and gentle she was herself.

“But, I *would* kind of like to pet your housecats, Sayaka-chan.”

“You would?”

“Sure. I bet they’d be nice like you.”

...What kind of wonderful person am I in Senpai’s eyes?

“Right.” Thinking about the cats, I smiled wryly. They weren’t even my cats, so I doubted they were much like me.

And so went my time at the restaurant with everyone, or rather, with Senpai.

Next, we went to the karaoke booth. When I tried to open my umbrella, Senpai beckoned me over. “It’s supposed to be pretty close, so why don’t we share?” I looked down at my half-opened umbrella and watched the remaining droplets of rain drip down it, then closed it again.

“If it’s not any trouble.”

I went under Senpai’s open umbrella. “Welcome,” Senpai declared with a wide smile.

She kept the umbrella raised at the perfect level, reminding me of the difference in our heights, however small. The karaoke place really was very close. We reached it without even walking for a full minute.

“That was short.” Senpai pouted slightly as she lowered her umbrella.

We were led to our room as a group. I was shocked to learn that a karaoke booth could fit twenty people. I had imagined it would be a smaller, more private room.

We crammed into the red seats. The middle was definitely uncomfortably snug, and it would probably be hard for those in the back to get to the door again. The room was full of loud music even before we started singing, and the strange brightness unsettled me again, just like at the family restaurant. Senpai seemed to feel the same way, her eyes drifting around uneasily.

We each ordered our drinks and then started looking through the song list on the little screen. The president, on the other hand, was already making her next move.

“I’ll use this occasion to make an announcement!” Suddenly grabbing the mic, she walked around the room before we could start singing. Then, she grabbed my arm.

“Huh?”

“We’ve decided that the next president will be Saeki Sayaka!”

I was still half-standing when she hit me with this out of the blue. No one had told me I was officially the next president.

“Um, may I have a word, president?”

“You mean *former* president.” She grinned as she pulled me to my feet, pressed the mic into my hands, and bustled back to her seat before I could stop her. “Please, go on with your inauguration speech.”

“What? Wait, but why me?”

When I voiced my doubts over the mic, I was met only with applause. *They’re not even listening*, I thought, dumbfounded.

“Our tradition is to pass the role on to the second year with the highest grades,” the president explained at last. I stared at her skeptically. “What?”

“Did *you* actually have the highest grades?”

At my question, the other club members laughed.

“Why you little!” the president roared dramatically. “I used to be at the top of my class. Right now—yeah, maybe not so much, but still.” She was acting indignant, but it wasn’t terribly convincing.

“This might affect my grades, too, so I’ll have to decline.”

“What do you mean, *too*?” the president interjected.

“...Or, well, I’d *like* to decline, but it’ll put everyone else in a difficult position if I refuse, so...” Ignoring the president, I gave up. *Oh well*. I had somewhat anticipated this, after all.

I breathed in. The sound of the club members' voices quieted by a degree. "I'm not confident that I can really see this through, but I'll do my best. I look forward to working with you all." I decided to give the safest statement. Really, I wanted to say something a lot more extreme than that, but I held my true thoughts back.

I hadn't asked for this in the first place, but I didn't want to bring the whole mood down. I couldn't bring myself to be that selfish. Caught up in the moment, the club members gave me a loud round of applause. Being showered with all their gazes and attention made me feel uneasy.

Once I gave back the mic and sat down, Senpai told me, "Congrats." I wasn't that happy about it.

"So I really did end up becoming president. Not that I wanted to."

"You can't help that."

"How could I not help it?"

"You're the prettiest one out of our whole club, for one thing," Senpai said in a quieter voice.

Me? The prettiest? I was embarrassed.

"That doesn't have anything to do with being president."

Then, suddenly, I didn't know what I was saying anymore. Embarrassment hit me in a belated wave. As Senpai smiled, I stole a glance at her profile.

But I think you're pretty, too, Senpai...maybe even the prettiest, I thought as I pinched my cheek slightly. There were so many faces lined up next to each other that I couldn't really tell. But to Senpai, at least, I was the prettiest. My face became a little hot.

When we left the karaoke place, Senpai stuck close by my side.

I sometimes looked at her, and sometimes couldn't bring myself to.

Before long, summer passed by, and an autumn breeze visited the music room.

It probably wasn't just because the senpai had left and opened up space in the room that the temperature after school had become a little more bearable. We changed into our winter uniforms, too. My family told me that the black sailor uniform I was wearing now suited me better. *Does it?* I wondered as I pinched at the sleeve, looking down at it.

Burdened with the role of president because of my grades, I was moving the desks in the music room to the sides, as always. Because we had fewer members, our individual workloads had increased out of necessity. When the next year came, if we didn't succeed in recruiting new members, the choir might break up.

Were these kinds of things the president's responsibility? Probably, I decided. My father always said that taking on burdens was the job of those in senior positions. But was there really a practical way to recruit more new members? As I mulled it over, I pushed the desk I was holding against the wall.

"Sayaka-chan."

"Senpai?"

Yuzuki-senpai was peeking into the music room. She hadn't come by since summer ended, so I hadn't expected her to make an appearance. She was calling me over now, though, so I stopped my work and walked to the door.

"It's been a while."

"Yeah." Senpai nodded and then put her finger to her chin. "Oh. Should I call you President Sayaka-san instead now?"

"Please don't."

This was getting out of hand. Shouldn't she at least be using my family name for titles like that?

"Did you come here to check in on us?"

The former president had already come to check in several times. Now that she was free of responsibility, whenever she visited our practices, she would just say, "Looks like you're busy," and go home.

"Oh, I guess so," Senpai answered vaguely and then looked at me.

I felt like I had seen that gaze somewhere before. Not just from Senpai, but from a little further in the past. I could barely think about it without turning away from those memories.

As I did so, I thought I smelled the phantom scent of chlorine-heavy water.

“I wanted to talk to you about something, Sayaka-chan. It can wait until after you’re done, though.”

Something she wants to talk to me about? I almost tilted my head quizzically at her. Maybe it was a long conversation we wouldn’t be able to finish here? I couldn’t think of what it could be.

For some reason, Senpai averted her eyes. “After you’re done, could you come to the courtyard?”

“All right, but...” Since choir was about to start, Senpai was going to have to wait a while. Was she all right with that?

“Okay, see you then.”

She turned to leave the music room, paying no attention to what was happening around her. I watched her back as she walked away with uncharacteristic speed.

“What was that about?” I murmured as I returned to my work.

A sense of peculiar restlessness haunted me throughout the rest of the meeting, but perhaps it was because I had recalled those far-off memories.

Even after club ended, I couldn’t immediately leave the music room. We had to clean up, and I was responsible for returning the keys to the staff room. Once I finished, hurrying a little more than usual, I rushed over to the courtyard. I felt like I had never really visited this part of the school, other than when I had cleaning duties there.

I changed into outdoor shoes and walked around the side of the school building. Sure enough, I found Senpai right away. She was standing behind the fountain in the middle of the courtyard, watching the water bubble up quietly. Her legs were close together, and her hands were folded on top of each other

as though to cover the gap.

“Senpai.”

When I called out to her, she immediately turned to me and then lowered her hands to her sides as she waited. I went around the fountain and over to her side, where our shadows elongated with the beginnings of the sunset. Her shadow stood even deeper and bigger on the ground than the real Senpai. When she shifted only slightly, her shadow moved dramatically, as though it were driving me away.

“Thanks for meeting me. I’m sure you had a long day,” Senpai began. Then her eyes wandered towards the fountain, as though she were trying to escape from something. “Sorry. Umm, this isn’t really a big deal or anything, but...”

Then why would you say you had to talk to me like this? I decided not to question something so trivial.

“Senpai, what is it...?” I glanced at the sky before I asked her. If I ended up leaving too late, the train would be packed.

Noticing my behavior, Senpai took a step towards me and said, “It’ll be really quick.” The shadow that stretched from her arm passed over me, as though to cover my face. “Sayaka-chan, listen...”

Senpai took my hand and enveloped it in both of hers. Her hands were a little cold, as though the autumn had seeped into her.

Then, Senpai said this:

“I love you.”

The first confession of love I had ever received in my life was straightforward. It was very like her to be so frank, I thought.

After my thoughts reached that point, my mind simply went blank. Nothing was in focus. It took a while for the cold sweat to build on my back and for me to start feeling hot. I forgot to even blink, so I felt my eyes drying up.

Senpai had told me she loved me.

I finally began to understand, like a thread slowly unraveling. So it wasn’t the

sunset that was coloring Senpai's cheeks, I realized.

“.....”

I hesitated to make a sound.

At first, I thought it was strange.

Because Senpai was a girl, and so was I. *We're both girls...* My mind seemed to run into a roadblock there, like my nose had smacked into a barrier much harder than the classroom wall. My hand, which was wrapped in Senpai's hands, started to smolder with more and more warmth. I wondered which of our hands was warmer—who was filling the other with more heat.

“If you'd be okay with it, I want you to go out with me.”

Senpai stepped even closer to me. *What should I do?* My mind searched everywhere for someone to ask, but of course, there was no one there to help me. If someone did come, in fact, I'd just be in even more trouble.

Only the breeze, filled with twilight, flowed by to dispel some of the warmth on my face.

Go out with her? In other words... I would have to come to love her, too. *Come to love her?* That was the part that was making me pause.

As I stayed silent, her eyebrows lowered worriedly. I had to say something.

Should I accept her?

Should I reject her?

Did I have to choose right now?

I wished she weren't asking so much of me.

“Could you give me a little time to think it over?”

My head was spinning. Just saying that was the most I could muster.

“Okay.” Senpai smiled somewhat nervously and closed her eyes. Her shoulders sagged, as if the idea of letting any time pass frightened her.

“Well, then...”

“Well, then?” *What am I even saying?* I thought incredulously. In the midst of

my confusion, I bowed awkwardly and left the courtyard with stiff steps. It was difficult to bend my joints. My limbs moved forward nonetheless, as though they couldn't wait for me to sort myself out.

I had always been proud that I rarely lost my composure by nature, but that might have all been in my imagination. I realized now that the palms of my hands had broken out into a cold sweat in spite of the pleasant fall weather.

A part of myself I hadn't known about had been laid bare, exposed to the wind.

When I looked back, Senpai was giving a little wave, her hand next to her face. Then, as though she were laughing at my awkwardness, her mouth softened slightly. The blood rushed up all at once to my ears, and I felt warmth envelop me as I turned forward again. My legs still couldn't bend as I quickly walked away.

It was the first time I had been confessed to, and I didn't even know what to think about it. Far in the future, I would sometimes look back on this moment.

That a girl had been the first person to ever confess to me might have hinted at my destiny.

I nearly missed my stop on the train home.

Then I failed to notice when I reached the bottom of the stairs, and almost tripped.

My route home, which usually felt long and listless, was already almost over, as though I wasn't allowed to put off thinking about it. Next thing I knew, I was looking up at my house gate. My line of sight was a lot closer to the top of the gate than it had been in the past. If I kept looking at it, I felt like I might never be able to move again, so I tried my best not to think of anything as I went into the house. I passed by my grandparents at the front entrance, where they were putting on their shoes.

"Welcome home."

"Thank you." My words slid through the pipe that was my throat as though

someone else were talking.

My grandmother looked at me, as though she had picked up on something. I turned my eyes away and quickly shuffled away so that her sharp instincts wouldn't figure anything out. I imagined that my head was floating on its own as I went down the hallway and somehow made it to my room. When I looked at the center of the room, where the light fell most, my vision felt as though it were spinning.

No, this won't do. I inhaled deeply.

I never wanted my family to see me this unnerved. After calming myself down a bit, I put down my bag and sank into my seat. When I exhaled, it was as though my tensed shoulders were shrinking.

I held my legs and gently rocked back and forth in my chair. Though I realized I hadn't changed out of my uniform, I didn't have the energy to move another inch. Every time I tried, Senpai would get into my head again right away. When I recalled her voice telling me she loved me, I felt my ears burning.

Tmp, tmp, tmp. My heart bounced around lightly.

I couldn't say that I knew Senpai very well, but I didn't think she was the type of person to joke about something like that. At least, that's what I wanted to believe. Her face had certainly looked quite serious about it.

I looked down at my right hand, which was balled into a fist. When I touched it, it still felt a little warm. I couldn't tell whether it was Senpai's heat that had - remained with me.

I thought of her face. Had I ever seen her in that way myself?

“.....”

No memories came to mind, of course. I didn't even think we had been particularly close. We did say hello and talk to each other, though, and the closing party had been fun.

I had always assumed that it was just the relationship between a senpai and underclassman, which was different from ordinary friendship. But thinking back, there might have been times when I saw or felt something special in her,

too.

“Urgh...” I shook my head instinctively. Although I’d had an inkling there was something going on, this was like realizing there was an entirely new world right next door.

It might have been because I’d been shut away in my room this whole time, but the air was starting to feel slightly tepid, like it was stagnant. I breathed in quietly and exhaled, then tried to soothe my still-fretful heart. Even as I did so, though, I felt the heat rising in my face from the bottom up. It was as if I had submerged my head in invisible boiling water.

A wave of shock rolled over me.

I did know of some rumors about this kind of thing. I had heard my classmates, who were inquisitive when it came to people’s love lives, get excited over baseless gossip. Someone from the class next door had tried to hold a girl’s hand at school, or their fingers had been intertwined, or they had been kissing—stuff like that. I didn’t think anyone would actually do that stuff while someone else was watching, so I didn’t believe any of it for a second.

And yet, just a short while ago, Senpai had been holding my hand. Now something I had deemed unbelievable was no longer deniable.

My head was so full I couldn’t think of anything else. I wondered how long I could delay my answer. Perhaps I should have given a more specific length of time than “a little.” I wondered if she would be mad if I made her wait a full week, but at the same time, this was an issue I could easily spend a whole month mulling over.

It was all new to me. This wasn’t something I could take extra lessons for, or something I could supplement with my school studies. The only thing I could do was accept reality, think it over, and make my choice. There was no practice round—this was the real deal.

To be honest, this sort of thing was a weakness of mine. When I had a goal, I could build up my efforts and bring about the results I wanted over time. I was confident about that much, but when someone wanted results right away, it put me at a loss.

No, maybe most people were like that, but sometimes there were exceptions. Sometimes, a person would suddenly, somehow, make something happen as if out of nowhere.

I wasn't that type of person. That was why Senpai impressed me.

I can't believe she was able to tell someone she loved them. Had she confessed her feelings to someone else before? She was absentminded, but maybe she had a lot of experience with love.

Still, she said she loved me. Just remembering it made me instinctively bury my face in my knees.

"So that's how it is..."

Out of all of the other underclassmen, she had been watching me in particular. She was still watching. She *loved* me.

I wondered what she loved about me? My face, or maybe how I acted? My attitude? My hair? Only Senpai would know if it was something else. I even kind of wanted to ask her. But would I be able to face her, ask her that politely, and listen until the end without running away?

"It's your face I like, Sayaka-chan. Because you're beautiful."

Urgh.

"It's because you're so amazing, Sayaka-chan. It doesn't even matter which years we're in—I feel like you're walking ahead of me."

No—

"It's the way you work towards your goals. I really love...the way you're so dignified."

—way.

Surprisingly, I got annoyed just imagining it. Or maybe I was getting a look into my own mind? Was that what I thought an ideal person should be like? I compared Senpai to that. Her face... Well, I did think she was pretty. But what about the rest?

Realizing how seriously I was thinking about it now, I was taken aback.

“I...hmm...”

If I didn't want that kind of relationship—if the idea simply made me feel unpleasant and nothing more—then I wouldn't have any reason to falter.

But I didn't immediately want to turn her down—which must mean I felt the same.

The thought made me press my face into my knees again. In the darkness, I hugged my legs tightly to my chest.

The next day, for the first time in a long while, I didn't feel like going to school. I had slept well enough, yet my head felt heavy and dazed.

In the end, I hadn't been able to study the night before—I simply couldn't focus on it. And that was a serious problem. No matter what difficult events transpired, I couldn't neglect honing myself.

“Oh, dear...”

With just a few measly words, Senpai had shaken my entire life. I thought I understood what the word *power* meant, but now I felt I was genuinely experiencing it for the first time.

Trying to avoid raising suspicions from my family, at least, I did my best to seem normal as I put on my shoes at the entrance. While I was doing that, the piebald cat appeared, as though to see me off. The two cats each looked slightly like my grandparents in their own way, I thought. Maybe it's true that animals can be influenced by the disposition of the person taking care of them.

This cat was more like my grandmother. It acted more energetic than the other and also had a sharper look in its eyes, as though its gaze pierced through anything it saw.

“Have a nice day.” I bade the cat farewell. It watched me in silence as I left.

I've often hoped for the train to come quickly to take me to school, but this was the first day I ever wished for the train to have a six-hour delay. Senpai was obviously going to be at school. But we weren't in the same grade, and she had retired from club activities, so we probably wouldn't run into each other unless

we deliberately tried to find one another.

“What will I do if she comes to see me, though...?”

I hoped that my concept of “a little time” wasn’t too different from Senpai’s as I gazed out the window. My mood had no effect on the clear blue sky whatsoever.

Even when I got to the classroom, I couldn’t escape the haze in my mind. I felt like people around me could tell there was something different about me and worried that they might be staring. But if I tried to check, it would seem even more suspicious, so all I could do was concentrate on feigning ignorance.

As I kept my head down and took notes from the board, I inadvertently recalled Senpai’s voice. I wondered if she was feeling the same way during her own classes.

Was she nervously awaiting my response? Maybe it felt similar to waiting for the results of a test. When I imagined Senpai like that, I knew I couldn’t leave her waiting for too long. Even if I did want to.

As I brooded again, I started to pitch forward, the top of the desk spreading out before my eyes. Then I abruptly righted myself in my seat.

If I stopped concentrating for a moment, even in the middle of class, my head would end up full of thoughts about Senpai. Hardly anything the teacher said at the blackboard got through to me.

Much to my shock, it was almost as though I was lovestruck already.

I shook my head and tried to forget about Senpai for the time being, but to little avail. Try as I might to look at my notes, the same thoughts wound up racing through my mind.

As this state continued through the first hour of school, and then the second, my anxiety continued to grow. I was in no state to be in class. If this kept up, it would certainly affect my grades.

I had to do something. But what did I want to do exactly?

I felt a sense of discomfort, anxiety, and confusion. Emotions that I could hardly describe as constructive were mingling inside me and laying waste to my

mind.

In the end, I stayed that way throughout the entire school day. The only positive was that Senpai didn't come to me during that time. Though I wasn't in the mood to go to the choir club, I knew I couldn't take the day off. I hadn't done a great job in class that day, so if I skipped club on top of that, it would inevitably feel like a giant step back for me. So I stood up from my seat, as though trying to shake myself free of something, and left the classroom.

I prayed I wouldn't run into Senpai as I headed to the music room and tried to act like my usual self. When the eyes of the members of the choir club turned to me, I felt even more on edge. I worried that they might know Senpai had confessed to me, even though that was impossible. No one would suspect such a thing.

But Yuzuki-senpai had been hiding those unthinkable feelings behind that smile of hers all this time.

It felt like someone I had never thought of as anything more than a background character in my life had suddenly become extremely special. I've occasionally heard that love changes people. And even though Senpai was the one who had fallen in love, I was the one whose perspective was shifting, as though she had dragged me along with her.

Maybe there was an immensely powerful force at work behind all this. Had that power suddenly overflowed in the school building, it might even be able to permanently alter the surface of the earth. It was a ridiculous thing to imagine, but that's what ran through my mind.

Once choir club activities were over, I quickly got on the train home and was relieved when I managed to find an open seat. If I had to stand in my current state, my legs might collapse under me while my mind wandered.

I let the train rock me back and forth. It felt like I was being jostled more than normal.

The sunlight streamed into the moving train from the window on the other side. The sun had started to set, tinting the sky orange. The sunset was coming earlier each day, I realized. Autumn was deepening, and winter was on the horizon.

What would the coming winter bring?

I imagined Senpai standing next to me, wearing that familiar smile on her face. If our relationship changed, I wondered if she would show me other expressions as well.

“.....”

I felt like I did want to see that—just a little.

That emotion felt almost like something bright piercing its way through me and all my confusion. But it immediately disappeared, along with a sigh. I felt futility, despair...utter misery, really. I had spent the whole day thinking about Senpai.

Love had interrupted my life just once, and even that small incident had made me lose my presence of mind. Perhaps I wasn't as composed a person as I thought. Before, I was confident that I was capable of all kinds of great things, but that belief was now somewhat shaken.

I tilted my face up, catching the sunlight right in my eyes.

Of course, I thought of Senpai from the time I got to the station until I got home.

Mostly, I asked myself whether I loved her. If I could only clear that up, I wouldn't need to torture myself any longer. I worked through the issues one by one, like I was scooping up rocks from the bottom of a river.

Was I opposed because we were both girls? To be honest, once I cooled down and thought about it, that wasn't the issue. The real question, what was truly important, was whether there was something between Senpai and me.

But I couldn't quite see what, if anything, was there. Perhaps I simply didn't know what it meant to love someone yet. If I asked Senpai about it, would I be able to understand the nature and identity of that feeling?

While I was questioning myself, the shadows lengthened, the streets were scorching, and next thing I knew, I was home.

When I opened the gate, I saw the shadow of a person to my right. My grandmother was looking out into the garden, holding the piebald cat. The

leaves and branches of the trees before her eyes were dancing in the wind, already colored by fall. My grandmother noticed me immediately, and her eyes softened slightly.

“Welcome home.”

She pet the cat as if to prompt it to greet me, so it meowed at me as well.

“Thank you.”

My greeting came out more naturally than the day before, at least. I even waved my hand slightly at the cat.

When I tried to go straight into the house, my grandmother called to me again. “Did something happen?”

“Huh?”

She had seen right through me. I stopped. My grandmother had the same tranquil expression as the cat. How had she figured it out?

“It’s all over your face.”

As soon as she said that, I rushed to hide it. If I told her about Senpai, it would be a disaster. My grandmother still held the cat as she walked over to me. Her direct approach never changed, no matter how much older she became.

“Do you like someone?” My grandmother’s insight, which wasn’t quite right but also wasn’t too far off, caught me by surprise.

“I’m at an all-girls school.”

“Right, right.” My grandmother’s expression looked more youthful than usual, her shoulders shaking mirthfully as if she’d been caught in the act of something naughty. “And is school fun for you?”

“Erm, yes...I suppose.”

“You’re quite an unusual child, aren’t you?”

It seemed my grandmother hadn’t quite expected my reply. It was in my nature to enjoy learning, so I didn’t think school was a bad place.

“Well, I don’t dislike studying.”

“What a wonderful granddaughter you are.”

My grandmother’s tone was light as she complimented me. Being praised was difficult, so I looked up at the trees in the garden like my grandmother had just been doing. They looked very similar to the ones in the school courtyard. Light was streaming in from the other side of the leaves, so I narrowed my eyes. The dusk light, not quite harsh enough to make me look away or close my eyes, settled over me.

“I don’t know what’s troubling you, but if you just approach it like you always have, I’m sure you’ll be fine. When you become an adult, you won’t be able to just start new things all the time anymore. Now is your only chance.”

My grandmother’s advice intermingled with the sunset. It was like the edge of a curtain flapped by the breeze, gently caressing my face.

“Adults already know the outcome of all kinds of things, you see. That’s why they become cowards.”

All kinds of things. Like a girl falling in love with another girl.

I could respond positively to Senpai. She would be thrilled. The two of us would be filled with something bright, but...was it doomed to an outcome that would someday turn me into a coward?

“That’s why all I do is look at the garden, and all your grandfather does is chase after the cat.”

Doesn’t my grandfather just do that because he likes cats? I thought.

“Is that how it is?”

“It is.”

My grandmother’s voice was steeped with her years, lending it a certain affirmation. It was like spray hitting the surface of my hesitating heart.

“This conversation took quite a turn from being about school.”

“Oh, that was just a greeting. I sometimes get in the mood for a nice long chat with my grandchild, you see. That’s how it is, too.”

My grandmother spoke plainly. *But don’t we talk all the time?* I thought. Still,

the frequency of our conversations other than quick greetings or scoldings certainly had decreased. Maybe my grandmother was lonely, though she didn't show it to anyone.

And I was even more distant from my grandfather, who wasn't present at the moment. It was like a gap in my heart that inevitably widened as I grew older. Whenever I noticed it, I started wanting to fill it in, like what I was doing right now.

"I'm glad we talked, too," I said.

Though she hadn't really been trying to teach me anything, I felt like she had given me a nudge.

Just as my grandmother said, I didn't know what would happen. I couldn't blame that on anyone. But having someone else's words was incredibly helpful when my heart felt all alone.

My grandmother's face softened slightly, and she gently pet the cat's back.

My grandmother, the cat, and I...

We were all quietly growing older, bit by bit.

Only the scenery of the house, cloaked in the sunset, remained the same as it had in the past.

That night, I finally decided on my answer.

I wanted to tell Senpai before my resolve faltered.

So I simply waited for the night to end.

As the train jostled me on the way to school, I realized something: I didn't know Senpai's phone number yet.

The things I knew about her were probably far fewer than the things I did not. Perhaps that was why I wanted to close the distance between us, join hands with her, and get to know her.

Once I arrived at school, I hesitated over whether to go to her first thing in the

morning. I wanted to give her my answer right away, but Senpai would have her own things to do. There was a chance that Senpai hadn't arrived at school yet, too. I stood at the foot of the stairs, looking up without moving.

But if I didn't tell her, I could see myself thinking about it all through my classes again. So up I went.

I braced myself as I headed up the stairs and towards the hallway containing the third-year classrooms. It was the first time I'd come to this area, other than for committee board meetings and such. Occasionally, among the unfamiliar faces, I saw other senpai from the choir club. Whenever our eyes met, they would voice their surprise at finding me there. "Huh?"

Each time that happened, I dodged them with an ambiguous smile. "Just a bit of business."

I didn't really know which classroom Senpai was in, I realized as I looked up at the doorplates, and my feet started to wander as though I had lost sight of my goal. As my limbs felt uncertain, like they were being washed away by a river, I heard someone call to me, "Sayaka-chan." I almost jumped. I realized I had been holding my breath as I turned to the left.

There, in the doorway of a classroom, stood Yuzuki-senpai. It had only been three days since I last faced her, but it didn't feel like that time had passed at all. There was the strange illusion that we had only parted in the courtyard a moment ago.

"Good morning." Gathering my nerve, I greeted her. My voice was somewhat shrill. I had to reign it in somehow.

"Morning... Did you want to talk to me?"

Her question was tinged with both hope and anxiety. I wondered which was greater.

"Erm. Yes. I came to see you."

I wonder what the older students passing by thought of our little encounter.

Senpai nodded. "Okay." Her face stiffened as though to show her nervousness. She was waiting for me to speak.

I looked around us, indicating my apprehension about the location we were in. “Would you like to go to the courtyard?” *If right now works for you*, I added silently with my eyes.

“Let’s do that,” she immediately agreed and then paused. “But I don’t have a lot of time...” Senpai turned to the classroom, evidently concerned about missing the beginning of class.

“It won’t take long at all.”

It was a conversation I felt like I had had before. I walked to the courtyard with Senpai by my side, doing my best not to look at her. She was silent, too, though I occasionally felt her gaze.

When we came into view of the outside scenery, Senpai stopped walking at my side and moved slightly behind me. Though I had never done anything in the courtyard until then, I wondered if it would become a place of memories for Senpai and me.

As I walked through the brick-paved courtyard, my footsteps felt loud, running counter to my emotions. Senpai’s footsteps seemed heavy, too, as she followed behind me.

Of course, there was no one standing by the fountain in the courtyard this early in the morning. Regardless, it was still pleasantly filled with sunlight and rustling leaves. Had I not met Senpai, I likely would have graduated without ever seeing this beautiful scene. Being involved with other people can open your eyes to so many new sights.

Once I arrived at the front of the fountain, I stopped and turned around. “Wah!” Senpai also stopped, giving a startled exclamation. She held her open palms in front of her chest as she took first one and then another modest step back from me.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

Just as Senpai had said, time was short. Neither of us had the luxury to prepare ourselves for this.

“Please, go ahead.” Senpai straightened her posture and responded to my words, almost as though she were the underclassman. It was a little funny,

which helped me relax just a bit.

“But there’s something I want to be very clear about first.”

“Yeah? Okay.”

I started with a strong opening, as though to establish that we were on different levels. It might not have affected Senpai, though—she didn’t have much of a reaction.

“I’m not sure whether I love you or not right now. Although I did think about it for a long time,” I added.

She nodded, somewhat apologetically. “I’m sorry. I know you’re busy now that you’re president and all.”

“Oh, that’s not... Well, I guess.”

Her feet shifted slightly. It seemed like I had started the conversation on a bad note, so I tried to lighten things up.

“But I suppose I didn’t feel put off...that you confessed to me.”

I didn’t *suppose* anything—and I hadn’t felt put off at all. Truth be told, I wanted to see what happens after someone falls for another person.

“It might be odd to say I want to try it out, but...I think it would be nice to date you and see what it’s all like.”

Perhaps it was cowardly of me to be so indirect in my reply to Senpai’s confession. But Senpai seemed to understand what I was trying to say: the color in her eyes grew brighter and more vivid, like a blooming flower.

“Sayaka-chan...”

Her voice sounded misty and vibrant, though I still felt a bit embarrassed that she used *-chan* on the end of my name.

It felt as though something sticky had hidden itself in the refreshing air of the morning. The feeling that eddied below my throat and chin was an entirely novel experience to me. I wondered whether this was how things felt between lovers, in a way that didn’t quite sit right with me. Maybe I was being too hasty?

But I had given my answer, and it had been accepted. I would become

Senpai's lover, so that I could come to love her back. I did feel like there was something wrong with the order of those things, but I couldn't take it back now.

Senpai took my hand and intertwined our fingers, drawing us closer together.

Another rumor had become reality. Senpai's face was tinged with warmth, like she was wishing a blessing on both of us.

"I've been yearning for something like this."

"...Something like what?"

Senpai answered my doubts with an impractical smile.

"This might be an odd thing to say right now, but...thank you, Sayaka-chan."

"Right..." My voice was slightly low as I replied, feeling petrified.

When Senpai said my name, it made my ears buzz. But unlike some time in the past, the sound filled me with a faint warmth.

That night, I looked up what the verb *to date* meant in a dictionary.

After I confirmed its meaning, I couldn't sleep for a while.

"Sorry I'm late, Sayaka-chan."

It was lunch break the next day. Having arrived first, I had been waiting for Senpai. We were in the courtyard, just like the day before. Senpai had set the time and place in advance before we parted.

While I was gazing up at the cloudy sky, Senpai approached me quietly, unhurried.

"Did you wait long?"

"Just a little."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Your classroom is a lot further away, anyhow."

And I couldn't exactly imagine Senpai running through the halls and down the

stairs.

Once we sat down on a bench near the water fountain, Senpai broke out into a smile, as though she couldn't hold it back anymore.

"I've always wanted to meet like this."

Her smile was buoyant, as though she were eating cotton candy. *I see. So this is what she yearned for.* I almost smiled, too.

"There's something wonderful about a secret relationship, isn't there?"

"A ha ha..."

If this was supposed to be a secret, we were meeting in a pretty open place. Anyone could have seen us, from any direction. I wouldn't be surprised if my classmates started gossiping about me at some point.

"Sayaka-chan, what kind of books do you like?"

And thus, we began our conversation, girlfriend to girlfriend. Though of course I hadn't experienced this myself, it was just what I imagined an icebreaker at an arranged marriage meeting might be like.

"I suppose I read a fair amount of contemporary nonfiction."

I wondered how others around us saw us as we sat side by side. Did we look like a close pair of an upperclassman and underclassman from the same club? Or did we look like lovers, just as Senpai desired? As I answered her questions, I pondered what there was between us. What exactly had changed since yesterday?

I looked at Senpai's close-by face, as if searching for answers.

"Oh, do you?"

Noticing Senpai's somewhat troubled smile, I realized that maybe I had said something wrong.

"I was sort of asking what kinds of novels you read," she explained.

Oh, so that's what she meant. To Senpai, books were novels.

But I didn't know what to do, so I looked away for a moment. Was it all right if I just told the truth? Or was I supposed to say what Senpai wanted to hear?

I hesitated, then answered honestly. “I don’t really read novels...”

It wasn’t just novels—I wasn’t really drawn to movies or television shows that were fiction, either. It wasn’t that I rejected made-up stories, but they seemed remote to me whenever I tried to read or watch them.

But it seemed that wasn’t the case for Senpai, who was smiling uncertainly.

“I read a really good book not long ago, so I was thinking of recommending it to you, is all.”

Oh, so that’s it. I nodded in understanding, just like before. This time, though, I didn’t hesitate as much before responding. “I’d like to read it. Could you tell me what it’s called?”

I was half-lying about wanting to read it, but I think half of it was the truth, too. In a way, I felt like I should try to learn about Senpai through this book. It was something like impatience—I couldn’t allow myself to remain ignorant of this person who wasn’t quite a friend or family member.

And when Senpai started to happily chatter away once I asked her about the book, I felt like I’d made the right choice.

As I was going home that day, I immediately took a detour to the bookstore when I got off the train. It was an independent store that wasn’t too big, located next to a grocer. It might have just been because of the time of day, but there were a lot more people gathered in the grocery store than the bookstore.

“Welcome.”

When I entered the bookstore, a middle-aged woman in glasses called out to me. A grandmotherly lady was sitting at the register. I couldn’t tell whether the grandmother’s eyes were narrowed or if they were just naturally small. As I took a brief look around the store, I wavered about whether to ask an employee where the book was but decided to look for it myself.

Not that anyone would ever guess at it, but I didn’t want what was between me and Senpai to spread too much to my surroundings if I could help it. I thought back to her voice telling me the publisher and author’s name.

“I believe the author was Hayashi...”

I traced the bookshelves with my finger. Checking over the author names that were lined up together, I came upon the right row after the third shelf.

Found it. My fingertip came to rest on the author's name: Hayashi Renma, whose works filled an entire shelf. Though this was the first time I had heard the name, the author seemed to be quite popular. Soon, I found the particular title Senpai had mentioned. When I pulled it down, it left a small and tidy gap on the shelf.

If I had made a gap like that in my own shelf, I probably would have filled it immediately. For some reason, I just wouldn't feel settled otherwise.

I took the book to the register. Compared to my brisk and active grandmother at home, the elderly woman in charge of the register was pretty slow at her work. While I was waiting for her, I heard a girl call, "I'm home," so I stole a glance over my shoulder.

The other woman gave the girl in the school uniform a cheerful reply. Based on how close they seemed, I surmised that she was the daughter of this family. I wondered if she was in junior high, too. She seemed a little small, so perhaps she was a grade younger than me.

The girl's eyes met mine as I stood by the register. After bowing to me, she pushed aside the curtain over a doorway and went into the back. I finished paying and left the bookstore as well. I wondered if the daughter of a bookseller could read all the books she wanted as I went outside.

"The books would belong to the store, so I suppose not."

And on top of that, just because she was surrounded by books didn't mean that she necessarily liked to read. What might a bookseller's child's cognizance be like as they grew up? That interested me a bit.

Soon I arrived home. The timing of the trains happened to sync up nicely on my way home, so the scene that awaited me in front of the gate wasn't too different from usual. Because I had gone to the bookstore that day, the sun was at a steeper angle than it normally would be, but that was all. While it was still midday, the light had started to mix with a bit of yellow.

Though it was trivial, that was another thing I never would have seen if I

hadn't been dating Senpai. I stared at the scene, a bit distracted.

Once I got back to my room, I glanced at my bed. I hadn't slept well the night before. Though I felt physically sluggish, I didn't think I would be able to sleep much tonight, either. My mind was racing with thoughts of Senpai. In the end, I didn't feel like I had an answer to anything.

I put down my bag, changed clothes, and immediately picked up the book I had just bought. Before I even started my homework, I was already opening the novel that Senpai had suggested. As I tried to read, I suddenly looked up with a start.

It had just dawned on me that I was prioritizing something else over studying.

Though it wasn't as though anyone else were around, I suddenly felt embarrassed, glancing to either side of me. My familiar room looked brighter than usual, and I couldn't figure out where to rest my gaze. Luckily, not even the cats were in my room, much to my relief.

I thought about what would happen if Senpai became my number-one priority both at home and at school. The thought was slightly appalling, almost as though I might become a completely different person.

Once I settled down, I put my glasses on. At some point, I had started wearing reading glasses at home. When I glanced down at my hands, they looked a little bigger, and even my seat seemed to be the perfect size.

So even I could have someone to love.

"Someone to love..." I muttered as I pressed a hand over my eyes. Once again, I was reminded just how unfamiliar this relationship was to me.

I wondered whether I would still be with Senpai even after we had become old ladies...but it was far too early for that, of course, and I was probably overthinking it. But still, if we were going to break up at some point, then why was I trying so hard right now? When I thought about that, it felt as though my leg had been caught in a dark hole, so I cut myself off.

I had to focus on what I needed to do in the present, not the distant future. Which is why I opened the book and kept reading. At first, it was light like a caress, but then I kept reading, getting pulled even deeper into it.

The novel wasn't about tender love or the refreshing drama of youth, but was instead a gruesome mystery. It had a hard-boiled writing style and a raw attitude towards life. Those who weren't tough died, were betrayed, or got duped somehow. The occasional moments when I felt disgust at that shudder-inducing story were likely a testament to the skill of the author's portrayals.

"Well, that was unexpected."

My comment was more about Senpai's tastes than the book itself. Senpai seemed so sugary and lighthearted that I would never have imagined her connecting to a story like this. I had just assumed that she was the kind of person who enjoyed watching protagonists find happiness and yearning for the same thing for herself. But in actuality, she was the type of person to recommend a book like this? It was almost like a surprise attack.

I envisioned the way that Yuzuki-senpai's soft hair curled unnaturally at the ends.

After pausing for dinner, I finished reading the book by nine o'clock that night. The afterword consisted of a simple report on the author's current circumstances and some thank-yous; there was no picture of the author to be found. Perhaps that had been done purposefully to match the book's formal style.

I closed the book and, still with my face turned down, stretched out my stiff back and arms. The light in the room felt almost overstimulating as it soaked my fatigued eyes. I left my chair and simply lay down on the bed.

When I rolled onto my back, I could feel my breathing bring my lungs close to my bones all the more intensely. Whenever I inhaled and exhaled, I felt the existence of each and every one of the bones in my rib cage. I recalled the part of the novel that described a knife being driven in down to the bone and realized that I was grimacing.

So Senpai liked thrillers. That was surprising. Perhaps falling for me was just another thrill to her. But if Senpai had sought love just for thrills, that would make me nothing more than her plaything.

But she wasn't that kind of person...was she? The more I came to know Senpai, the more I doubted her. Or perhaps it was just that the version of

Senpai I had envisioned was becoming more dubious.

I had learned one thing about her. Maybe that meant I had come to love her a little more? *I wonder if that's how it works*, I contemplated, as though I were examining well-formed rocks one at a time in the pitch-black darkness.

That there were unexpected parts of her—yes, I think that was a good thing. As though I were trying to grapple with an exercise, I ended up wanting to chase after an answer. But I wondered whether the real Senpai would be revealed to me when I found that answer.

...Huh? Then is the Senpai I always see a fake? Have I started a relationship with a fake Senpai? It gnawed at me somewhat.

I already knew, of course, that the face people showed to the outside world wasn't their true self. I was the same way. Those who let their true thoughts show through were lacking something as human beings.

But was showing our fake faces to each other really love? I didn't know.

And, of course, this wasn't something I could talk to my grandmother or the rest of my family about, so all I could do was find the answer myself. There was no adult to provide helpful knowledge of various outcomes, just the current me—a fourteen-year-old only able to fumble around in her own way.

I think that's what it means to become an adult, though it's quite difficult to do.

There were so many things I didn't know that it was dizzying.

It reminded me of a distant day in the past, floating peacefully along on the surface of the water.

"Senpai, I read the book you recommended."

The next day, I immediately brought up the subject to Senpai as soon as I saw her. She was slightly taken aback. "That was quick."

"I needed to go to the bookstore anyway, so..."

I lied. Why would I lie about that?

Maybe I was too embarrassed to be honest and tell her that I had gone to buy it because I wanted to learn more about her right away. How could I possibly admit that?

“Oh. Then I guess I didn’t need to bring this.” Senpai pulled out a paperback book from her bag. It was the same book I had bought the day before. “You said you wanted to read it, so I thought I would lend it to you.”

“Oh...” *I guess I jumped the gun.* “Well, it’s the thought that counts.”

“Sure.” Senpai put the book away, then seemed to pull herself together and asked for my opinion. “So how was it?”

If I told her that it was boring or not to my taste, then my ties with Senpai might snap on the spot. Should the relationship between lovers really be so fragile?

“It was interesting.”

At my passable comment, Senpai broke into a smile. Though they were generic words that seemed like I hadn’t put any thought into it at all, sometimes simple was best. It was certainly much better than saying something strange and complex that wouldn’t convey what I wanted to express.

“Though it was a bit more violent than I expected,” I added.

“Right? When I was reading it, it tricked me so many times—that’s what I thought was great about it.”

I didn’t know whether our conversations were really in sync or not, but something else about her comment caught my attention.

“So you like being tricked.” That was an unusual thing to like. I, of course, loathed being tricked.

“Sayaka-chan?” As I sank into silent thought, Senpai looked at me quizzically.

“I’m thinking of a lie to trick you, Senpai.”

Trying to lie was difficult. I don’t think I’ve ever actually said a lie that didn’t have a slight amount of truth in it. I felt like anxiety would accompany any words that didn’t have some amount of truth at their core.

To borrow a certain someone's assessment, I'm a serious person. But when she saw how intently I was thinking about all this, Senpai suddenly started laughing.

"What is it?"

"Sayaka-chan, you're so much funnier than I thought you would be."

"But I haven't told you a lie yet..."

Senpai was already gripped with laughter. ...*Good*, I thought. *She really is enjoying this.*

Bonding with her over the book and accompanying that with a bad joke had delighted her. There was something about that that made me feel fulfilled, too.

And they all lived happily ever after.

Or did they?

In reality, I knew deep down that I really *had* told her a lie already. I obviously didn't think the book was that interesting. But I thought that Senpai would feel more satisfied if I lied than if I told her the truth.

I wondered if Senpai loved this version of me. In that case, did she not love me as much before I read the book? I had accepted her recommendation, and now I was being overwritten from the fingertips up. The past I had established up until now was fading away and scattering.

My legs felt unsteady as it occurred to me that if our relationship kept deepening even more from here on out, the change wouldn't stop.

"Senpai..."

I was sure that the me I would be with Senpai in half a year's time would be an entirely different person.

"What is it?"

"If you read another interesting book, please let me know."

Something that hadn't existed in my heart before was starting to show itself. I wondered where it came from.

"Okay. You have to tell me if you read anything, too, Sayaka-chan."

“I will.”

That's not going to happen.

But if Senpai was going to tell me that she loved me, I found I was willing to indulge her. I wanted to respond to her expectations—even if it eroded away the person I was up until that point.

I would slowly turn into the person my partner wanted. I wouldn't bear any fear or doubts about that.

I thought that was what it meant to love someone.

Eventually, although it certainly took long enough, I learned that Yuzuki-senpai's first name was Chie.

I had just gone on calling her Senpai and Yuzuki-senpai all this time and became so self-conscious about it that I couldn't get it out of my head. If you're wondering why I suddenly thought of that, it's because I heard Senpai's friends calling her Chie when I spotted her at school.

“Senpai, your friends seem to call you by your first name, don't they?”

It had been on my mind from the moment I heard it around lunchtime, but I had to keep the thought to myself until after school.

Senpai was older than me and wasn't a train commuter, so she didn't have any reason to hurry home.

There were a vast number of differences in our day-to-day lives, so the times I could meet with Senpai were limited to between classes, at lunchtime, and after school. Those moments rarely added up to much throughout the course of a day. I wondered if Senpai really felt satisfied with that.

“Don't your friends do that, too, Sayaka-chan?”

“Well...” It wasn't unusual for people to call me by my first name, but I never called anyone by theirs.

“I wonder if it's because of the gap in our grade levels?”

“I don't think it's something as significant as that.”

Things like that probably differed according to each person's disposition.

“.....”

I wondered if I should have been calling her by her first name all this time.

Her friends called her by her first name, so having her girlfriend call her by her last name made it seem as though our relationship was more distant than friendship, when it was supposed to be quite the opposite.

But I had another concern.

“Sayaka-chan?”

Even if I did call her by her first name, I hesitated over whether to add an honorific or not. To not do so when she was older than me went against my sensibilities. When I thought about calling her Chie in order to try it out, all I felt was a sense of incongruity.

Then would it be Chie-san? That felt almost like I was a customer service employee or like I was putting on airs, which just didn't sit quite right with me. I doubted that I could keep up a conversation calling her that.

Chie-senpai, then? If I were to call her by her first name, that would be the most appropriate way to do it, I thought. When I rolled the sound around in my mouth, it felt embarrassing. It was like I didn't know where my heart lay—that was how it would have felt calling her that.

Chie-senpai—what was I thinking?

I felt like if I called her that, the person in front of my eyes would see me as an entirely different person. I abandoned them all, realizing they were all too difficult.

“I think that ‘Senpai’ just suits you best, Senpai.”

I omitted everything in between—if I had explained all of my thoughts honestly, I obviously wouldn't have been able to bear it—but Senpai's eyes went wide. Despite her alarm, she turned serious, attempting to understand what I was saying.

“Are you trying to say something really moving?”

I turned my face down. She didn't need to understand.

"I think what I'm trying to say is that I'm glad to have met you, Senpai."

No, it isn't.

"I look forward to seeing you during lunch breaks, Sayaka-chan."

I felt somewhat envious of Senpai when she said that to my face without batting an eye, unlike my embarrassingly sappy attempt to cover up my thoughts. Still, I felt as though we weren't quite getting through to each other.

"Isn't it beautiful to think that we have a secret connecting just the two of us?"

"Right..."

She had said that earlier as well. It seemed that she was really taken by the idea of secret relationships. It didn't really speak to me, though. To me, making it a secret meant that you felt guilty about it. Which was true in my case, I suppose.

It felt like a connection that would immediately snap if anyone tugged on it in the slightest.

"Senpai, may I ask you something?"

"Yeah, go ahead." Senpai grinned. When she spoke with me, she acted at best like someone in the same grade as me, and at worst like a first year. I felt the beginning of a chill on the autumn wind against my back and took a deep breath of it before speaking.

"What made you fall in love with me, Senpai?"

Though asking her that was honestly embarrassing, I couldn't avoid it any longer. If I didn't find out now, I wouldn't know what plan to set up going forward.

"Umm... Uhh..."

Senpai, of course, was wriggling and reeling in the face of such a direct question, her gaze wandering away. Her embarrassment even transmitted to me. I started to distinctly hear the sound of the water fountain, like I was

becoming more sensitive.

“That’s tricky.”

“I understand.” Even I would have been at a loss if someone I were dating suddenly asked me that. *I wonder how I’d respond.*

I thought for a bit. If it were me, I might have said it was the person’s face. The face is the first thing people come to love about one another. Though when I really thought about it, that was odd, too.

We humans naturally understand the differences between our hands and legs and faces. We accept the differing value of beauty and ugliness. Even if a person had the prettiest hands in the world, if their face was unsightly, they would probably have a difficult time being the object of romance.

Most people consider faces special. Perhaps that’s because the other person’s face is usually right around the same height as one’s eyes. Who wouldn’t be happy if they could see something beautiful so often?

“Can’t I say all of you?” Senpai couldn’t seem to think of anything concrete, so she tried to create an escape route for herself with what she had.

Her love became somewhat muddier to me.

“I just wanted to know for reference.”

“Reference for what?”

“A lot of things.”

It wasn’t as though I could tell her I was doing it to refine myself into a person Senpai would love. If she loved me, I wanted to sincerely respond to those feelings. A person’s feelings, I thought, were something that should be handled politely.

“Right... Maybe it’s your kindness?”

“You’re just saying something at random now, aren’t you?”

I wouldn’t go as far as to declare that I wasn’t kind, but I also wasn’t that gentle of a person. Senpai was a lot better at being friendly, in my opinion.

“I just think you’re a really good girl, Sayaka-chan.”

See, this kind of thing is the problem. I'm sure anyone could be perceived as "good" as long as they could just make decent conversation.

"Then in that case, I'll be even kinder to you, Senpai."

At my words, Senpai's eyes went round. Then she laughed again. "You really are so kind." When she gave me genuine praise in response to my joke, I didn't know how to respond.

"I don't know about that. I think anyone can seem kind if they feel so inclined."

As long as they had common sense, anyone could produce as much kindness as they needed.

"That's not true," Senpai softly disagreed. "Kindness comes in all different shapes. I like *your* kindness."

"Is that so..."

What are you trying to say at this point? Something warned me that it would be tactless if I tried asking for specifics. What Senpai was saying was so abstract at this point that I didn't know whether to be flattered or not.

"That seems awfully deep."

"Well, I have to say deep things once in a while. I am technically your upperclassman, after all."

Technically, huh? I muttered in my mind. Just as Senpai had told me earlier, someone being born a year earlier didn't mean that they were more responsible, so perhaps it was tiring to have to act like a mentor all the time. I felt the same way on occasion now that I was the choir club's president.

But did all of this mean that there was nothing concrete she liked about me?

"It's kind of embarrassing, but if I'm being serious, I think I like the way you act." Senpai put her hand on her knee and bent forward as she looked at me.

"The way I act, you say?"

"Yeah. When I first saw the way you carry yourself, it just made me think, 'Oh, *that's* what elegance is.'"

“Is that so?” I looked down at my open palms. This must be a part of me that was so deeply ingrained that I didn’t even notice it myself. “I *have* taken a lot of lessons.”

“I knew it.” Senpai was thrilled that her assumption was right, crinkling her eyes up so much that they almost shut.

But any student at this school would likely be the same way. Even Senpai seemed like she was a so-called respectable rich girl, though I didn’t know anything about her family.

And most of those lessons were buried in a time I had long since forgotten. I think this may have been the first time they had actually come to fruition in the way I used to expect. You never know how the past will come to connect with the present.

But, well... I looked at the scene around us and let a moment pass by. I was struck by dizziness again at the fact that I was having a conversation like this with another girl.

“I think time’s about up, isn’t it?” I murmured as I checked the time on the clock on the school building’s wall. The glass on the front of the clock was cloudy and gray; perhaps it was too high up to be cleaned. Regardless, it still accurately informed us that our allotted lunch break was over.

“Time does fly when you’re having fun.”

I never thought I would actually hear someone say the clichéd line I had seen from time to time.

“It does...”

It was true that when I was with Senpai, I thought about so many things at once that time seemed to go by quickly. Perhaps that was my way of having fun.

Senpai stood from the bench. She lightly patted down her skirt and then said, as though she had suddenly remembered, “Oh, I have something I need to do at home, so I can’t wait for you after school today. I’m sorry.”

“No, I don’t mind...”

I felt bad for making her wait every day until after I was done with choir club, anyway. Besides, our homes were in different directions, and I had to take the train, so even if she waited to walk with me, our time together was short. It also distracted me during choir, so not having to meet was actually easier on me.

That was the logic behind my response, but for some reason, Senpai was silent at first. A few seconds passed.

“That makes me feel a little sad, though.” As she said that, a shadow of loneliness passed over Senpai’s smile.

“Umm...”

“Oh, it’s fine, it really is. Well then, see you tomorrow.”

Senpai waved her hand slightly and started to walk ahead of me. *Right, if we don’t see each other after school, I suppose we won’t meet again until tomorrow*, I realized as I watched Senpai go. Still, I puzzled over the meaning of her remark.

She said she felt sad. But why? I thought over what I had said, too, and looked down slightly.

“I see...” Senpai wanted me to be disappointed that I wouldn’t be able to see her after school. When I said I didn’t mind, that might have been a bit too cold.

In other words, what I had just done hadn’t been kind at all.

“Hmm...being a girlfriend can be difficult.”

I had to turn my lies into the truth. After all, I was still only pretending that we were lovers while I was by Senpai’s side.

If anything, the more I came to love her, the more I might try to act like the version of me that Senpai wanted. I didn’t know whether I could get to that point, but I still sincerely wanted to try, I thought.

I wasn’t opposed to taking on a challenge.

October was in full force now. As the leaves gained color, the sun and temperature sunk ever further.

When we were close to the water fountain, I felt like I might start shivering from the waterside chill. One day, when I met with Senpai during lunch break as always, she held my hand. Anyone could have seen us, but Senpai didn't seem to care. I thought we should probably be more careful, but instead of saying anything, I just squeezed her hand in return.

"Your hand is so warm, Sayaka-chan."

Senpai often speaks like she's in a story, I thought.

"When winter comes, I might just want to hold your hand all the time." Her words seemed to sparkle, as though she were in a daydream. Both of our hands were pale white.

"Senpai, when you see me, does your hand start to warm up?"

At the moment, her hand was cool and the difference in temperature felt nice, but I was curious.

"What? Why?" She didn't seem to understand the question, so of course she asked what I meant.

I had asked her something embarrassing. "No, it's nothing." The words seemed to bubble out of my mouth.

When I looked up, the sky was pale, like the surface of water. Senpai and I gazed up at the watery mirror that seemed to reflect the past.

Soon, we parted ways and went back to class. I returned to my desk, weaving my way through the gaps in the commotion.

"Hey, Saeki-san." The moment I sat down, the girl behind me started talking to me.

"What is it?"

"Where do you always go during lunch break?"

As I turned my head, my neck felt as though it were stuck in place.

"Plus, you always rush out of the classroom right away lately."

"Erm..."

As I said before, I'm bad at lying. Unfortunately, the way I fumbled to respond

right away seemed to pique my classmate's interest even more. The library? No, I decided it would be better not to let those easy lies pile up.

Instead, I told a lie that took into account the possibility she had witnessed me with Senpai. "I was having an upperclassman tutor me."

"Tutor you?"

"Of course. That's the minimum you have to do in order to keep up your grades."

I knew my eyes were shifty.

"Wow! I can't compete with you."

My classmate grinned teasingly. I smiled back the best I could and turned back to the front. Once my expression was hidden from her, I sighed surreptitiously.

"You've changed, haven't you, Saeki-san?"

"You think so?"

"You seem so excited when you leave the classroom lately."

I turned around.

"You must really be a serious student to get so excited about learning... Huh? What's the matter?"

"Excited? Me?" That was an emotion I had been completely unaware of, so I wanted to know more. Since it had nothing to do with her, my classmate was unreserved about telling me the truth.

"That's what it looked like, at least."

"Did it...?"

Once I heard that objective opinion, I ended up thinking, *Maybe she's right*. If the people who weren't involved saw it that way, did that mean that I looked forward to seeing Senpai more than I had thought?

I touched my face. It felt calm, not particularly excited. What was I doing, checking that now? The fact that I couldn't hide how shaken I was rattled me even further.

I wonder...

Maybe seeing Senpai was exciting to me because she was on my mind all the time. I wondered what the difference was between that and actually coming to love Senpai.

Strange, I thought again. Then, I secretly felt a little resentful towards my classmate. Though we were about to start class, my non-school-related problems were only increasing.

And although I thought a lot about Senpai and our relationship, I realized that my discretion was still much too lacking.

Soon, I would be even more keenly aware of that.

We hadn't even arranged to meet in the courtyard on that day, but by coincidence, I bumped into Senpai outside the school building. Though we were in different grades, our PE classes were right in a row, so we sometimes passed each other on the school grounds.

Senpai and I each had several classmates at our sides. I froze, not knowing how to act. We couldn't just ignore each other, but if we greeted each other and started talking, I thought the people around us might grow suspicious. As I hesitated, Senpai was the one who acted first.

"Sayaka-chan," she called out like usual, as though she hadn't really put any thought into it. "How are you?"

I knew that I should pretend to be just another underclassman. But since this happened to be the first time I was seeing Senpai in her gym clothes, I ended up really noticing them. Because she was always in her school uniform, the way she was wearing a tracksuit top now was a change of pace.

"You seem different when you're in your gym clothes." As though she had thought the same thing, Senpai looked me up and down.

"You, too. Compared to your uniform..." *You look so much younger*, I almost said. "...you look a lot more like an upperclassman."

"Oh, it makes me so happy to hear you say something like that."

Expressing that happiness so publically seemed a little reckless, I thought.

“Erm, well, we should be off to class.”

I gave her a slight bow and tried to go past her.

“Right.” Senpai’s answer was short and casual in a way I didn’t quite understand.

Well, a conversation like that probably wouldn’t lead to any problems. Though I mentally admonished myself for being so paranoid, I still felt relieved, until suddenly...

Senpai’s lips were next to my ear.

“I’ll be waiting after school.”

When she whispered that to me in a surreptitious, almost husky voice, it sent shivers through me. I turned around in spite of myself, and saw Senpai grinning in satisfaction. There was a tinge of red on her ears and cheeks.

It seemed to have made an impression on my classmates, just as I’m sure it did on hers. They clustered around me, asking, “What was that just now?”

“Hmm? What was what?”

I laughed awkwardly and looked into the distance. All I could do was bear it until it blew over.

Senpai’s sigh that lingered in my ears told me without a doubt that she had always wanted to do something like that. But it was so risky.

My mind threatened to go blank, but I forced myself to stay calm, standing in line in front of the PE teacher as I pulled myself together. *Right. I have to be the one to make sure we don’t stand out.*

If we both had our heads in the air, we would stick out like sore thumbs wherever we went.

At home, at school—there were many places I needed to keep my feet on the ground.

After school, when we were supposed to meet, I could see a light shower of rain in the part of the courtyard visible from the hallway. Senpai would probably

head there anyway, though, I thought as I stuck close to the window. There was no sign of anyone around the fountain, of course.

As I gazed through the window, I could see the pool used for swimming class. The serene surface of water stirred along with my memories, rippling gently.

“Oh, there you are, Sayaka-chan.”

Senpai’s face peeked into the hallway from the stairs. Wondering what she was doing, I headed over to Senpai, who retracted her head from the stairwell in a quick movement. For some reason, the way she moved was very funny.

When I arrived at the end of the hallway, Senpai was right in front of the stairs. “I was trying to figure out what to do because it was raining, but this worked out great.”

“Yes, it did. But why were you...” I implied the rest of my question with a gesture. *Why were you hiding behind a wall looking at me?*

Senpai detached herself from the wall and explained. “Well, I thought it would be weird if an upperclassman were wandering around the second year’s hallway.”

That was a normal enough reason. I had assumed Senpai didn’t worry about things like that, though, so it was unexpected.

“If it rains like this again, we might have to stop meeting until it clears up.”

“I understand.”

In that case, I hope it doesn’t rain often. The thought surprised me a bit. *So that’s how I feel, is it?* I remembered my classmate saying I looked excited.

“It used to rain whenever I was supposed to have field days... I hope my luck has changed since then.”

It was a bit strange for Senpai to start worrying about it in that way. Was every day a big occasion to her? I felt a strange combination of excitement and relief to know that the time she spent with me was special.

“Senpai...this is a weird question to ask, but do you ever think about me when we’re apart?”

What did I think I was doing, asking that in the hallway? It felt terribly reckless. But, in that moment, I really wanted to know.

Though she was bewildered at first, she replied almost immediately. Her response, too, was something she shouldn't have said in a place where people might walk by.

"I'm always thinking of you."

"Are you really?"

That was probably the answer I was hoping for, but it met my expectations almost too perfectly, inspiring a note of doubt.

"Yeah, I think about how I want to do stuff like *this* and *that* with you." She pointed to the right and left, seemingly at random. Though I looked where she was pointing, I saw nothing but walls.

"Like what, for instance?"

"Oh my gosh! Don't ask me that—it's embarrassing."

Senpai jokingly hit my shoulder. She was right that it wasn't something we should talk openly about, though.

But still...

"Then are you going to just keep *wanting* to do them and leave it at that, Senpai?"

If she wasn't going to be up front about it, then what was the point?

Nothing would happen if we didn't put it into motion ourselves. That was why I accepted Senpai's confession and presumably why Senpai confessed in the first place.

"Hmm." She went into thought for a bit. "In that case, I'll try doing it today."

"Huh? Um, okay."

What a strange declaration. Senpai nodded to herself and walked away rather quickly. *I wonder what that was about.*

Then, that night...

“Sayaka, the phone.”

My grandmother called out to me, holding the cordless phone. I started to stand up but then remembered that the cat was sitting on my lap.

“Who is it?”

Though cell phones had proliferated in this day and age, my house still had a landline, since quite a few of my grandparents’ acquaintances didn’t have cell phones. I didn’t have my own phone, either, nor had I ever felt the need to call someone individually until now.

“It’s an upperclassman from your school—Yuzuki-san.”

The moment I heard her name, it was like fireworks were going off in front of my eyes. I hadn’t been able to think of anyone who would have wanted to call me, but now it was cuttngly clear.

“Thank y—ah...”

The cat wouldn’t move. When I urged it by petting its back, the tortoiseshell cat finally got up and headed over to my grandmother.

I took the phone in exchange for the cat.

“Don’t talk too long now, *Sayaka-chan*.”

“Um...okay?”

My grandmother never called me that, so I raised my eyebrows. *Why would she say that all of a sudden?* I looked between the phone and my grandmother. They seemed connected but also somewhat distant.

After checking to make sure my grandmother had left with the cat, I went back to my seat. *All right, then.* I cleared my throat.

“Hello?”

“*Oh, Saeki...Sayaka-chan.*”

Senpai’s voice seemed to form a V as it sank down and then leapt up again.

It really was Yuzuki-senpai. I didn’t remember ever sharing my home number with her. Maybe she looked it up through the choir club’s contact network. At any rate, right at this very moment, I was talking on the phone with Senpai.

“This is quite a surprise.”

“Hmm, is it, though? I told you I was thinking about it, didn’t I?”

“Huh?” I frowned doubtfully, but then I thought back to what had happened today after school. Was this one of the things she had been thinking about?

Was it *this* or *that*, I wondered?

“I’m doing something I’ve always wanted to do.”

“You mean talking on the phone?”

“That’s right.” Senpai’s voice lowered. *“A call to my sweetheart.”*

Without thinking, I pressed back against the wall, as though I were trying to keep the sound from escaping.

Wasn’t there anyone around at Senpai’s house? No, if there wasn’t, she wouldn’t have lowered her voice. It seemed kind of bold, or maybe just reckless. I looked around, checking that there wasn’t anyone around in the room or hallway. Neither my grandmother nor the cat was sneakily hiding in the shadows.

“I’ve been yearning to do this.” Her voice was round and sugary, like a piece of hard candy.

“Well...I’m glad you got to do it, then.”

I wonder if either of us could ever have imagined that I would be the one to play the role of that sweetheart. I, of course, hadn’t entertained the thought at all. Senpai had always just been Senpai.

Until the day she had confessed her love to me, that is.

“Oh, and sorry, but I asked if Sayaka-chan was around at first.”

“I see...” That explained it. I turned around and narrowed my eyes at the hallway, as though glaring at my grandmother, who of course wasn’t there.

“Sayaka-san seemed weird, and if I said Saeki-san, well, everyone is Saeki-san in your house, so...I didn’t know what to do, so I just blurted it out. Aha ha, I’m sorry.”

“Oh, erm, it’s fine.”

Even my family had never called me Sayaka-chan. I think that the adults at kindergarten might have called me that, but that was a long time ago, the memories distant as if buried in sand.

Right now, at least, I was only Sayaka-chan to Senpai.

...It was a little embarrassing to think about.

"Hmm, but now that I've called you, there isn't much to talk about."

I could tell that Senpai was smiling awkwardly, as though she were in a bind. I was, too.

"We do see and talk to each other every day already, after all."

"That's right. But when I was calling you, I could feel my heart pounding..." At that point, Senpai's voice wavered for a moment and then immediately surged back up. *"So I guess it's fine, since my heart pounded already."*

Her childlike reasoning almost made me burst out laughing. At the same time, I felt as though I were steadily heating up. It was a mild warmth, not unpleasant in the least.

That warmth brought about honest words in me.

"As long as you're satisfied, I think that's more than enough."

"You really are such a good girl, Sayaka-chan."

"That's not true."

"But actually, I'm not satisfied. There was one other thing I wanted to do, too."

"Oh, is it something like *this*?"

"No, it's something like that."

"I don't understand the difference."

"But to do that, I would need you to work with me, Sayaka-chan."

"You need *me* to?"

I wondered what she was going to make me do. Senpai's head was always full of cotton-candy dreams, so I was sure it would be something embarrassing. If I

was going to do something like that, I really would need to prepare myself, not run from my feelings...and just do my best.

“Please be gentle.”

“Aha ha... I don’t think it’s that intense. Or maybe it is...”

When she muttered something that seemed like a warning, I shrunk away.

Stuff like *this* and *that*. I felt like even I was starting to imagine it.

“Well then, it’ll seem weird if we talk too long, so...”

“Oh, yes. Thank you very much.”

As I told her goodbye, pretending to be an ordinary underclassman, I waited for her to hang up.

“.....”

“.....”

“Well then.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll hang up first.”

“Please do.”

Fwoo, I heard her breathe in. Then, after three seconds went by, the phone hung up.

“Phew...” I almost laughed out loud.

The way Senpai acted made me smile, and my heart seemed to swell up at her voice. So I felt real affection toward her.

“.....”

My guilt about it was gradually fading, both at school and now at home. I wound up wanting Senpai more than anything. If all the negativity could be purged from my affection, this might just become love.

“Why am I thinking about something so embarrassing...”

“Could I get the phone back?”

My grandmother's face slithered in to peek in from the hallway. I almost jumped when she appeared without announcing herself.

"The phone, please."

"Oh, right, yes." Somewhat embarrassed, I gave the phone back with such force that I was almost throwing it. My grandmother held the phone along with the cat and looked down at me.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Are you two close?"

Her searching tone made me a bit nervous. I was usually fine with my grandmother's sharp gaze, but it became a lot more difficult to bear when it was piercing into me like this. It felt like any response I gave would reveal that I was hiding something. After all, it would be suspicious if I said there was anything private between me and an upperclassman at school.

"She's an upperclassman from choir."

I wasn't lying.

"Is she?"

My grandmother petted the cat as she left without probing any further. She was fiddling with the phone, so maybe she needed to make a call of her own. *Whew*. I breathed out and turned to my bed, collapsing on it.

Senpai's surprise phone call was bubbling in me now. It was a comfortable exhaustion, as though I had overcome something. When I thought about Senpai, who seemed happy because of a single phone call, I ended up feeling giddy, too.

But she apparently wasn't satisfied with just that.

Maybe that was for the best, though. Because if she *had* been satisfied, then things might have just ended there.

I found out what *that* was two days later.

As we met in the courtyard like always, there was something awkward about

the way Senpai moved. Her responses were clumsy. The sky was clouded, as if it might rain at any moment, but that didn't seem to be the cause.

"Is something wrong?"

When I questioned her out of genuine concern, Senpai seemed to choke on something. Once she stopped coughing, she finally got ahold of herself and spoke.

"Actually, Sayaka-chan..."

Senpai slipped to the edge of the bench. She folded her legs close together and her body tensed as she looked at me out of the corner of her eyes. I didn't understand what this was leading up to, so I just watched her, until Senpai suddenly made her move.

A move that struck at the shyness I had buried deep down.

"I was thinking that I really wanted to try...kissing you."

Perhaps Senpai simply lacked any degree of reservation. Her words were so unexpected, I felt almost as though I had been randomly stabbed by a stranger who happened to be walking by.

My throat immediately felt dry. "Is that *that*?"

"It is," Senpai answered simply and nodded. Then we looked at each other, and eventually looked away.

"....."

I righted myself on the bench and coughed.

"Well, that's...not what I expected *that* to be." I was shaken, though I tried to feign composure. I wasn't even doing anything, but I felt warmth blooming below my eyes. "Is that another thing you've been yearning for, Senpai?"

"You haven't, Sayaka-chan?"

"To be honest...I hadn't even thought about it before."

Because my feelings for Senpai were...are... My eyes searched for somewhere else to look.

I took a peek at Senpai's lips. They were thin—both her lips and mine. What

did it mean? I didn't know, but my chest seized up with the intense awareness of it all. And, although I know it's an awfully strange thing to say, I felt like I wanted to drink them in—the awareness, her lips, the emotions, all of it.

“Do you want to...try?”

My voice seeped out as though breaking through my throat.

Senpai almost leapt up from the bench in her obvious surprise. Then she spread her arms out wide. Was this supposed to be an accepting pose? As I watched her rather nervously, she lowered her arms again, so slowly I could almost hear them creaking.

“I think it would definitely be lovely.”

Where was she getting those expectations, I wondered? Her words seemed to flow from my right ear to my left as I stood up. Long strides—one step at a time. I closed the distance between Senpai and me until we were almost touching.

“Are you...sure?”

Are you sure you want me? was the unspoken part of my question. Because this was probably going to be Senpai's first kiss, too.

“I think...I'm sure.” Senpai's tense response came out rather comical, but this wasn't the right time to laugh.

First, our hands stretched towards each other. My right hand and Senpai's left intertwined. We each held on to the other, not letting go as we pulled close together.

Senpai's other hand tilted up my chin. Her fingertips pressed lightly on my skin, as though to fine-tune the angle.

Her warm touch made my spine quiver.

Finally, Senpai took a step forward with her left foot.

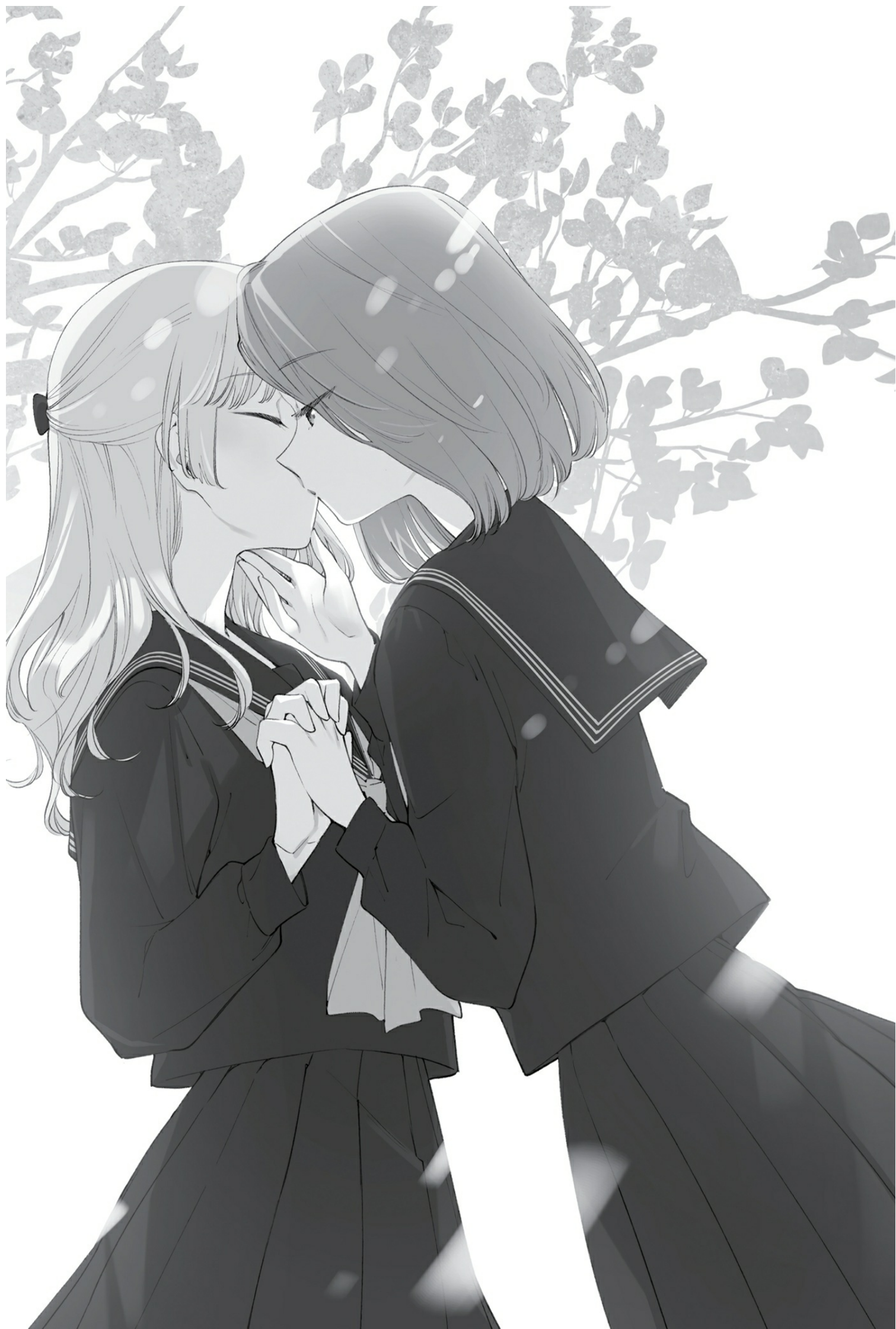
Then her lips touched mine.

For an instant, my vision melted away into nothing. I was filled with brightness whose source I did not know, as though I were peering into a fountain of light.

It felt like the parts of us that were touching were about to melt right into each other.

The wind blew above our heads, and the rustling of the trees grew louder.

Though I was startled by that sound, I stayed still, overlapping with Senpai.



Eventually, when we finally parted, she took a step back from me. I felt as though I was about to stagger and tried to dig in my heel for support.

My heart was beating terrifically, to the point that I could hear its steady rhythm in my ears drowning out all other sound.

But Senpai...

"...Huh?"

Senpai tilted her head quizzically. It was a terribly foolish-looking gesture.

Tap, tap, tap. The tip of Senpai's foot struck the ground.

"Hrmm." She knit her brow.

"Um, Senpai?"

Anxiety welled up inside me. It was impossible to tell what had happened to Senpai or what she had felt. Glancing at me, she quickly straightened her posture.

"Umm...I'm embarrassed, that's all."

Senpai looked away as a smile came over her mouth, but not her eyes. Before I could ask her if that really was true, though...

"How was that for you, Sayaka-chan? The kiss?" She spoke quickly, asking for my appraisal. I was at a loss and looked up to the sky.

When my lips touched Senpai's, something had rushed through my chest, flowing from my chest to my fingertips and filling me with an itchy heat. My palms became warm.

Something I had once heard about from someone else was happening to me now.

Ahh... As the past and present tied together intensely, the overlapping trees in the courtyard felt disorienting to me.

I couldn't run from it anymore. This feeling could only mean one thing.

"It confirmed...that I love you, Senpai."

I collected my many emotions and conveyed them to Senpai in one brief

sentence. When she received that short and certain answer, Senpai looked down.

“I see.” She turned away. With her back to me, all I could see was her hair swaying from side to side.

“Senpai?”

“I see...”

Unable to ask what Senpai meant as she repeated herself, I anxiously tried to look into her face. But before I could, she turned around abruptly and grabbed my hands. With the force of that, she brought her face close to me and put her lips on my chin.

Her eyes blinked directly in front of mine.

My chin felt a little wet.

“I missed.” Senpai loosely moved her face away and held her mouth. “And I bit my lip, too.”

“...Oh, dear.”

I didn’t know what had transpired in her mouth as she covered it, but her shoulders shook up and down. “I guess we need to practice,” she mumbled.

“I-It seems that way.” I couldn’t help but giggle a little. Though this still wasn’t the right time for laughter, it seemed to spill out of me naturally. Senpai was just too cute to me.

My kiss with Senpai seemed far stronger than the harsh wind rattling the leaves in the background.

This was my first kiss with Senpai.

It was also the first kiss of my life.

And the first love of my life.

A floating feeling that was all but foreign to me stole me away from the ground, to a place where the stability and common sense I had walked with until now did not exist.

“We just need to practice!”

“Right.”

We exchanged awkward goodbyes and quickly, blatantly, went our separate ways.

“Hmm?” This time, when I was alone, I murmured a doubtful noise of my own.

When we separated, Senpai’s lips were moving slightly. She didn’t make a sound, but I suspected that what she had mouthed was...

“This isn’t good.”

The courtyard at school was the place that bound me to Senpai.

I was a train commuter and Senpai was a third year, and that was just the beginning of our differences. The sole reason we could see each other was because of our promise to come here.

The only other thing we were in sync about was...well...that we loved each other, I suppose?

That embarrassing thought made the tip of my nose flush as we walked through the courtyard together. Senpai had just finished her junior high graduation ceremony. She was carrying her things and her graduation diploma, so we couldn’t hold hands.

“Today will be the last day we’ll be able to meet here, won’t it?”

“Uh-huh.”

My connection with Senpai was coming undone. My anxiety was fanned by the still-wintery wind. Spring was so far away. And when that spring did come, I wondered whether it would bring any warmth with it.

“Sayaka-chan.”

“Yes?”

“Want to kiss?”

At her sudden proposal, we both stopped walking. It was unusual for her to say it out loud before she did something.

“Yes.”

Since Senpai’s arms were full, I took her arm and brought my face close to hers. I pressed my lips to hers, and she simply accepted it. Both her top and bottom lip were cool and dry.

At some point, we had stopped caring who might see. I cared more about Senpai than the people around me. I wonder when exactly Senpai started to feel so dear to me?

I parted from her lips. When I moved my face away from her, her eyelids were heavy, as though she were drowsy.

“Senpai?” Her unenthusiastic reaction made me nervous, but Senpai sluggishly shook her head.

“It’s nothing, sorry. I’ve just been a little out of it today.” She laughed awkwardly and then wrinkled her nose in irritation as the wind blew her bangs into her face.

Well, I suppose it makes sense that she’d feel scattered today, I thought.

“It is your graduation day, after all,” I said aloud to test my theory. I wondered how she had been during her grade school graduation. My memories of grade school became rushed and hazy somewhere in the middle, so I didn’t remember my own very well.

“Right... Yeah, it must be because I just graduated.”

She squinted her eyes, looking into the distance. All I saw in that direction was the blue skies, so I couldn’t figure out what she was looking at. The fact that I couldn’t share that with her frustrated me a little.

“Well, see you later.”

With that, Senpai left the school behind as though it were nothing. The school seemed to lose some of its depth without her. I wondered if I would be able to see her anywhere else. We hadn’t even talked about that before she left.

And so time passed...

Senpai left before the flowers had even blossomed on the trees of the courtyard. So now, I was looking up at their beauty all alone.

Senpai left junior high, and I became a third year. My classroom moved to a higher location, but there wasn't anywhere higher to go from there, and Senpai had become distant from me. I might be able to see Senpai again in the grade above me once I graduated myself, but that was still a year away.

When I thought about how I would have to wait for spring, then summer, then fall, then winter to come, I was overwhelmed. The warm sunlight felt irritating when it touched my skin. It seemed the good weather that - accompanied spring was staying for a long visit.

No matter how long I waited here, I wouldn't be able to see Senpai. We hadn't even made arrangements to meet. But despite knowing that, I found myself coming to the courtyard during lunch break. There wasn't anything in particular for me to do if I stayed in the classroom, anyway.

I wondered if Senpai was thinking of me, too.

I hope she hasn't forgotten me. Though I was half-joking, the thought still made me anxious. Since I hadn't heard from her, it was hard not to feel that way. She wasn't that far away from me at all, of course. If I wanted to see the high school, I just had to walk a bit. But there were many other obstacles to getting there.

Senpai had said long ago that she wished we had been in the same grade. Now I found myself agreeing with her. Or perhaps it would have been better if we had met only after I entered high school. There were all kinds of things I couldn't do anything about.

I tried to switch away from just worrying about things and take stock of the situation.

First, I hadn't seen Senpai since she had started high school. It had been several weeks now, so to be honest, I was lonely. So I wanted to see her, of course, but the problem was that I didn't know how to do so.

Senpai had said that she had been forbidden from having a cell phone until high school. Because we saw each other all the time at school, that hadn't been an obstacle, but now that we were apart, I was lost as to what to do about it. Even if Senpai had gotten a cell phone now, I didn't have an opportunity to ask what her number was.

I couldn't figure anything out without seeing her, but I couldn't talk to her if I didn't know her phone number, which meant we couldn't arrange a time to see each other. I felt like I was caught in a vicious cycle.

I had scruples about going to see Senpai directly, especially now that it meant venturing to the high school. But if one of us didn't make a move, we would never be able to get into contact. Senpai was never going to coincidentally come to the junior high courtyard, and I didn't think I could do the opposite. When I imagined never seeing her again, I could only think of dark things that weren't fitting for the spring.

I slouched forward, resting my chin on my knees in an unladylike way as I narrowed my eyes.

Maybe I should try waiting at the high school's gate after school.

Right now, that was all I could think of. I didn't know what was happening with Senpai: not when she would go home or whether she had joined a club. Though I once felt like I understood her a little, now she was becoming a mystery to me again. Maybe I would be stuck repeating the same cycle over and over again without ever fully understanding her.

I closed my eyes, hesitating over whether to go through with it. Would that cause trouble for Senpai? I couldn't see how it would be a problem, but I still felt that sense of restraint and anxiety. Now that she had started high school life, she just seemed so far away. If things kept up like this, that feeling would only get worse. The sole solution, it seemed, was to see Senpai's face.

Okay. I'll go see her.

With that decided, I felt relieved. Really, I had known what I needed to do from the start. The only question was whether I would manage to build enough courage to act on it.

It took some time for the spring sun to warm me enough that I could set the plan into motion.

Once school ended, I took the day off from choir with the excuse that I was feeling sick and quickly left the school building. This was the first time in my life

I had ever taken a sick day. Though it felt like the guilt of this crime was dragging me down, my body kept moving forward. When it came to my list of priorities, which included school, club work, and various responsibilities, I knew I had moved Senpai to the very top.

I've heard that the words and actions of someone head over heels in love can appear comical to others. I wondered if I also looked like a buffoon.

For the first time ever, I headed towards the high school. The high school building was adjoined to the junior high, so I saw it immediately. Going around the outside wall, I reached the front gate, where I started to pass by students from the high school. I checked whether Senpai was among them as I leaned against one of the pillars of the gate.

The light of the early afternoon felt warm against my neck. If Senpai had already gone home, how long would I end up waiting here? When I closed my eyes, I imagined a train going incredibly far away. Without a train to take, I couldn't get anywhere.

What would my family think if they knew I was slacking off in both my club activities and my studies? Obsessing over Senpai might leave the rhythm of my life in a terrible state.

Though it was warm outside, my thoughts grew increasingly dark. I opened my eyes and started simply counting the people who came out from the gate. How many did I count before she finally appeared?

"Sayaka-chan?"

When Senpai called to me in slight surprise, I felt a wave of nostalgia. The fear of being abandoned that had been building up in my head crumbled away.

"Senpai." I pulled myself away from the gate and turned towards her voice. Senpai was there, but she wasn't alone.

The two people standing next to her were probably her new high school friends. They certainly weren't other upperclassmen from choir club. As she looked at me, an odd expression came over her face. Senpai turned to the two and explained, "She's an underclassman of mine... Yeah, sorry, I can't go with you today."

She exchanged one or two more words with the others and then came over to me. When we faced each other directly, I smelled an entirely new aroma. I wondered if it was coming from her scarf.

“It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah.” As Senpai replied, she turned to watch the two friends she had just parted from, looking rather worried.

“Senpai?”

“Oh, right.” Her tone and smile were equally vague as she turned back to me. It felt as if I had swung at something and missed, several times in a row.

This was going a little differently from what I had imagined.

“Is something the matter?” Senpai asked. As she tilted her head rather curiously, all of the momentum went out of me, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“What do you mean, ‘Is something the matter?’”

Our long time apart hadn’t bothered Senpai at all?

I was flummoxed by the evident difference in our commitment. Senpai seemed to realize this from my attitude and spoke in a quick, flustered tone. “Oh, you came to see me. Thank you.”

I heard her words of forced gratitude waver in the gentle spring wind. They were pure white, inside and out—no meaning behind them whatsoever.

“Sorry. I was just so surprised because it was sudden.”

“Not at all...”

Senpai was only human, so of course she lied and tried to keep up appearances like anyone else. I knew that, but the fact that I was the target of it now did hurt my feelings a bit.

But I was too weak to bring myself to ask her, *“Am I bothering you?”*

“What’s wrong? Why’re you staring at me?” Senpai wore a strained smile. If I came closer, I would just be making the uncomfortable mood even worse.

I paused for a breath and slowly chased away the too-large hopes that had

lurked inside of me.

“It’s nothing,” I muttered, as if to myself as much as her. “I just thought that your smile looked a little more mature, Senpai.”

“Whaaat? But I only just became a high school student. That can’t be true.” Senpai waved her hand as though to say *no way*. Then, she smiled as she fiddled with the ends of her hair. “But I’ve become an adult in your eyes, then, Sayaka-chan?”

She chuckled, looking rather satisfied with herself. When she acted like her old self again, the sense of maturity vanished, even though I was the one who had pointed it out. Still, I was relieved to finally see the Senpai I knew.

“Senpai, do you have a cell phone?”

Now that I felt like I could ask her that, I went straight into business.

“A cell phone? Yeah, I do.”

“Could I have your number, please?”

Though I didn’t think that she would say no, I still felt like I had to ask politely.

“Of course you can, but...” As she pulled out her phone, her eyes wandered left, looking into the distance. “Could you give me *your* number, Sayaka-chan?”

Our conversation had gone slightly out of sync, which had always happened from time to time. Senpai could be a little oblivious.

“Oh, do you have a cell phone, though, Sayaka-chan?”

“Yes, I have one now, too.”

The order in which these things occurred to her was very typical Senpai.

I had asked for a cell phone in order to connect with Senpai, but I realized once I got it that there was no point unless she had one, too. Now I would finally be able to use it. I told her my memorized phone number.

“It’s this and this and this...is that right?”

Senpai showed me the screen of her phone to have me verify it. If it was wrong, then I would have to be “sick” again to take another day off of club activities, so I was careful when I checked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

Once I replied, though, I realized that maybe this wasn’t quite the same.

If Senpai didn’t call me, I wouldn’t know her number. The next move would be entirely up to her. It wasn’t as though I didn’t trust Senpai, but I was the one who made this situation happen. Senpai didn’t seem to have been particularly inclined to act.

That bothered me a bit. But I pretended not to see it.

“Wow, though. I didn’t even know your phone number...” Senpai muttered as she looked down.

“Senpai?”

“No, it’s nothing.” Once she finished saving my number, Senpai put away her phone. Then, she looked down at me intently.

“Sayaka-chan.” She said my name again as though correcting herself.

“Yes?” I replied, but she didn’t continue.

“Hmm...” Senpai’s mouth contorted into an unusually moody expression. Her eyes screwed up, too, and then closed as though she were in thought.

While I waited for her to speak, cars passed by us on the road. Though they were on top of the asphalt, I heard strange noises, as though gravel had been caught up in their wheels.

“Actually, never mind.” She reigned her difficult expression back in and put on a smile instead.

“But now I’m worried...”

“I thought about saying something, but I ended up thinking that maybe it doesn’t matter.”

“Huh?” That got me even more curious to know what it was.

“There really isn’t a long way to go, but let’s walk home together for a bit.”

As if to change the subject, Senpai started walking, with me accompanying her. My legs seemed to be lighter now when they were moving than when I had come here.

But it wasn't because I was relieved; I just felt empty. My coming here didn't seem to have changed anything. All that happened was that Senpai's phone grew just a bit heavier with my phone number.

I had yearned for this time with Senpai for so long. But now, though she was walking beside me, she felt more distant than ever before. I wondered if it was because there was a sort of wall between us now that she was a high school student.

Or maybe...

"What is it?"

Senpai grew self-conscious, fiddling with her hair. Perhaps it was because I had been looking up at her absentmindedly.

"It seems like you've gotten taller than me again, Senpai."

"Wow, I can't believe you noticed. When I got measured at my health exam, I was a little taller." As though she were a bit proud, she put her palm on the top of her head.

Of course, it wasn't as though I had noticed that. But now that she mentioned it, it really did look like she had grown. I felt harried that Senpai seemed to be getting further and further ahead of me.

"I'd like to hurry and catch up to you, Senpai," I murmured.

Senpai's eyes went wide for a moment. Then she turned to the front and said, "That would be nice."

When we parted, she added, "I'll try calling you tonight."

I had become so simple that those words alone were enough to clear the fog inside me ever so slightly.

I couldn't seem to keep hold of my complexities when it came to Senpai.

That night, time passed painfully slowly, but I could barely concentrate on my homework.

I kept stopping to look at the cell phone placed beside me on the desk. *This is*

no good, I thought, but I still couldn't concentrate. It was rewriting my standards to the point where I wondered if romantic love really was necessary to life. Though I knew that I couldn't let myself get stuck in this so much that it interrupted my studies, I could hardly moderate my human emotions.

I stopped and stepped away from my chair to lie down on my bed. As I did, my eyes turned to my bookshelf. There were a lot more novels there now, despite my general lack of interest in them. Whether outside or in my own home, Senpai's wishes had influenced me. And a phone call from her had yet to come. There were four hours left tonight. I covered my eyes with my arm, as though I were running from the light. Why couldn't I escape the feeling that I had stagnated?

Though I had finally seen Senpai, my feelings were gradually starting to get clouded. I went into a stupor and abandoned myself to the ticking of the clock.

The phone rang an hour after that.

I leapt up and reached to the desk. I picked up the phone in a panic, saw the unfamiliar number, and accepted the call. "Yes, hello?"

"Hello, is this Sayaka-chan?" It was Senpai's voice.

"Yes..." I sat myself back down on a chair nearby. Then, I noticed I had left the sliding door open and immediately went to close it.

When I peeked into the hallway, my eyes met with those of a passing cat. *Ah...* I faltered a little. The cat seemed to see right through me for a moment and then quickly turned away. As it left, I whispered to it, "Please keep this a secret," and closed the door.

"Huh? Sayaka-chan?"

"Um, right, sorry. Yes, it's me."

"So I got the number right. I'm glad."

"Me, too." Now I wouldn't have to take a day off of choir again. Working my way out of my flustered state, I sat back down at my seat.

"Is now a good time?"

"Yes, I just finished my homework, so now is perfect."

I glanced at the nearly-blank notebook I had left open on the desk. I was getting a bit used to lying. When I realized that I had started to lie in order to get someone to like me, I felt something a bit like guilt. But who did I feel guilty towards, I wonder?

"This is the first time I've talked to you on the phone, isn't it, Sayaka-chan?"

"No...we talked before, too."

"Oh, right. I mean over cell phone."

"Yes, for that it is."

"I feel like you sound a little young over the phone."

Young?

"I guess young is the wrong way to put it." Before I could say anything, Senpai corrected herself. *"Childish...? Or is that worse?"*

"Umm...I think young is fine."

I didn't actually think that either of the two words Senpai offered were very flattering, but no better alternatives came to mind. For the most part, I was always hearing my own voice, so I didn't feel like it had an age.

"Let's just say you mean I sound cute."

"Yeah, that might be a good way to put it."

Through the phone, Senpai's laughter seemed a little higher-pitched than usual. Maybe that was why I sounded young to her.

"So, my cute Sayaka-chan..."

"Please stop..." I felt a flare of second-hand embarrassment.

"Umm, so..."

"Yes?"

"I was wondering what we should talk about."

Senpai laughed awkwardly, a series of short sounds that seemed to stumble over each other. This was a problem we'd been having since the year began, and we had yet to find a solution. Maybe that was why we hadn't made much

of an effort to meet all this time?

Something to talk about... I put my hand on my knee and thought for a while. All that came to mind was school. "Senpai, have you decided on a club to join?"

"A club? I'm not part of one right now. I've heard the stuff we have to study in high school is hard, so I wasn't really sure if I'd have the time."

"I see..."

It seemed that she didn't intend to join the choir club in high school. In that case, I probably wouldn't be singing next year, either. Since my standards were dictated by Senpai, I occasionally felt like I was full of incongruities. After all, I hadn't even been living as this version of myself for a full year yet. I wondered if I should really be placing more importance on this than my own self-worth.

"What about you, Sayaka-chan? Is it hard being you, Miss President?"

"It's mostly just a lot of small tasks, but it still adds up to an awful lot to do. Plus, I have to be the one to contact everyone about things."

"You have to find a lot of new members, too."

"Ha ha ha..."

All I could do was laugh lightly at the impossible problem. Then, as though the wind had swept away the moment, we went silent. My index finger meaninglessly drew circles.

There ought to be plenty of things for us to talk about, though. I wondered why we couldn't have a good back and forth.

"I don't think I can see you much, but I'll call you."

"Okay... Oh, and I'll call you, too."

"Okay."

Silence visited us again. I could hear Senpai's breathing over the phone ever so slightly as I searched for words. As I failed to find any, I could tell she was pulling away from me.

"Well then..."

"Yes. Good night..."

“Yeah, night.”

Once we finished our goodbyes, the line went dead. Senpai was the one who hung up.

I saved the phone number she had called from. I didn't know what to put as her name, so I decided to make it Senpai.

My neck hurt, as if it had been tensed up all this time. With my phone still in my hand, I slipped from my chair over to my bed. I fell over and took a large breath in, feeling like I could simply sink into the bed and disappear.

Maybe I had hoped for too much? Instead of reaching my high expectations, I ended up just watching myself fall to the ground with a splat.

I couldn't even motivate myself to move the hair that was on my cheek as I looked at the calendar on my phone. Skimming through my plans for the next month, my eyes paused on the next long break. I wondered if she would meet me on the three-day weekend in May.

We had each other's numbers now, so I should be able to meet Senpai outside of school. I remembered when Senpai had called my house in the past. At this point, I finally realized that she'd had a way to contact me all this time. It would have been easy for her to call me again.

Or maybe she hadn't called because it wasn't that easy? Maybe it wasn't that she couldn't physically do it but that her heart wasn't following through?

“.....”

Walking by yourself for several weeks was a long time, I thought. It was enough to wear down one's heart.

I wondered if Senpai hadn't missed me after all. Perhaps she was more of an adult than I thought she was. I couldn't swallow this one-sided loneliness, so it wrapped around my body like a long string.

I held my chest and laid down on my side, as if grieving.

I wondered what Senpai wanted from me right now.

Senpai continued to occupy my thoughts, like always.

But the uplifting feeling that had accompanied those thoughts last year was gone—instead, it almost felt oppressive. It was as if the thoughts were piling up all around me, and I had to either clean them up or be crushed beneath them. I didn't like where this feeling seemed to be headed.

Meanwhile, I was slacking off with my studies and club activities. My quiz grades were starting to slip. Though I knew the obvious—that I could not let this go on—all I could do was think about Senpai, to the point that it even reigned over my actions. I had already let love's poison affect me too much.

The thing that I was most concerned about wasn't my slowly lowering grades but whether to try asking Senpai out on the long weekend.

Yet on a night just two days before that break, I stood paralyzed, cradling my phone. I wondered what my family and cats must be thinking of me as I simply stood in my room without sitting or lying down.

I felt some kind of delineation—that if I was going to ask her, today was my last chance. And yet, I did not move.

"I really should have...asked her the last time we talked on the phone."

Sometimes, if you wait, time can resolve a problem on its own.

Other times, you can simply be too late.

In the end, I didn't message her or call her, and the time dwindled by. Her reaction when I went to see her in the spring had made me cowardly. I ended up at a standstill, worried that the same results would be waiting for me. And, just like that, she retreated further and further away.

...In retrospect, this moment might have been a crossroads.

Or maybe I should say that it was an opportunity that I let slip through my fingers.

So the break was over, and I lost my chance to ask Senpai out. I was able to

hear her voice during May and June, but I couldn't see her. It was strange to talk on the phone without ever seeing each other. I couldn't even picture what expression she might be wearing on the other side of the phone.

I was usually the one who called her. The only times Senpai really called me were during our days off. Maybe high school life was busier than I thought.

While Senpai and I kept exchanging calls occasionally, the seasons changed, and summer was ahead of us before I knew it. The changing colors of the nature outside my window announced the coming of the season, like an alarm clock indicating that time was up.

"Oh, right. You must have retired from choir club by now, right, Sayaka-chan?"

"I did, yes."

"Thanks for all your hard work."

"Not at all." I waved my hand, though there was nothing there but a bright wall.

Though dusk had already passed, the cicadas were crying energetically outside. Since there were so many trees at my house, summer was a lot noisier for us than for other places. I let my thoughts run amuck with the chorus outside the window as I continued to talk to Senpai over the phone.

"Are you going to join choir club once you come to high school? I took a peek, but they looked pretty intense."

"I haven't decided yet, but since you're not in it, I might not."

"I see."

Silence fell like a droplet of water. The ripples it left formed into a whirlpool that started buzzing in my ears until Senpai's voice came through.

"Sayaka-chan, do you..." Unable to say it, Senpai trailed off. *"No, never mind."*

"You've been saying that a lot lately."

I wondered if there was something she was indecisive about. If so, I wished she would just tell me so I could fix myself. I liked it better when people got to the point quickly instead of talking around things.

And so, I decided to be direct myself.

“Um...Senpai...”

“What is it?”

“I was thinking...we could see each other sometime during the summer break.”

I thought of the many pure white sections in my calendar.

But Senpai’s reply wasn’t so favorable. *“Oh...sorry. I was thinking of taking summer classes...”*

“I see.” In order to not let my disappointment show through, I had braced myself for either response. So although my heart wasn’t in it, I could keep the conversation going. “I hope you do well.”

“Thanks.”

I would have to breathe a heavy sigh later, after we hung up. That was all my hopes had amounted to. I just had to force myself to bear with it.

“Sayaka-chan.”

Senpai’s voice hampered my plans, disrupting my breathing.

“What is it?”

“You’re such a good girl, Sayaka-chan.”

She was praising me out of nowhere again. They were flowery words that I had heard more times than I could count by now.

“Um?”

“Maybe that was the part of you I liked.”

“Huh?”

“Supposedly kindness is mundane, but that’s not the case at all, is it? Because the shape of kindness varies from person to person. I think I must have fallen for the shape of your kindness, Sayaka-chan. Just thinking out loud,” she concluded quickly.

“I think you’ve told me that before...”

The “shape of kindness” was an expression that had somehow left an impression on me.

“Oh, have I?”

Senpai didn’t seem to remember it at all. Was she being absentminded...or did she just not care? Still, I felt like I had a better understanding of what she was trying to say this time than before.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t have a lot of opinions, so I keep saying the same thing.”

“No, it’s all right. It brought back memories.”

Our almost whisper-like laughter overlapped. For me, there was embarrassment in my laughter, and for Senpai...well, I didn’t know. It felt like her laughter conveyed a bit of pride for something far away, or perhaps there was just a peculiar distance to it.

“Still, that was out of nowhere, just like last time.”

“I just wanted to clear up some feelings.”

“Clear up?”

“I feel like the inside of my mind has been all in a swirl lately... I do a lot of thinking, too, you know. About a lot of things,” she added. It was almost as though she was trying to prove something.

I wondered if someone had once told her that she didn’t think about anything. It made me think about all the sides of Senpai that I had never seen or heard about before.

“Do you?”

“Yeah.”

That she would even talk to me about such things made my heart weep.

Normally, when Senpai talked about herself, she always stopped immediately. She had claimed that was because there was nothing to say, but clearly there was after all. I was a little happy she had told me this.

“Well, see you.”

“Yes, see you later.”

Today, I was the one to hang up. When the line cut off, my heart sank steadily, just as I knew it would.

A summer without Senpai. I had yet to experience a summer with her. My calendar, full of nothing but openings, seemed to flap away in my mind, even though there was no wind.

Summer seemed to be in twilight before it even started, and soon it sank into the night, disappearing well before morning came.

The second term arrived, and the trees in my house's garden started to change for the season. In a rare turn of events, Senpai called me that afternoon.

"Good afternoon, Sayaka-chan."

"Oh, Senpai... Good afternoon."

I practically abandoned my mechanical pencil, which hadn't moved much for a while anyway. Lowering my voice as though to keep things secret from my family, I curled toward the phone as if to absorb more of Senpai's voice. *I must look like our housecats do when they're at ease*, I thought absently.

"So, this is sudden, but could you meet me tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" I automatically checked the date and day of the week. Today and tomorrow were weekdays.

"I'll go over to your courtyard. Would after school work?" Senpai was being uncharacteristically proactive.

"That's fine with me, but..."

This seemed out of the ordinary, so I felt some hesitation, almost resistance. Senpai was coming to me? All the way to the junior high?

"Did you need something in particular?" I wondered if it was something she couldn't talk to me about over the phone.

"Yeah...I'll tell you when we meet."

"I see..." It sounded important. I was both nervous and hopeful. "I'm looking forward to it."

“...Okay.” Senpai’s voice grew steadily weaker and more distant.

After we hung up, I tilted my head in puzzlement. Though I wondered what it could be about, my heart also bounded at the prospect of seeing Senpai.

I took a glance at the no-longer-growing collection of novels on my bookshelf. *It would be nice if we could talk about that sort of thing, too.*

Perhaps this feeling, like an endless chronic disease, would be worth it in the end after all.

And so...

The weather was beautiful that day, too. Gentle rays of sun poured down under the small, puffy clouds, which seemed to symbolize the start of fall. As they touched the bench, the palms of my hands felt like they were gradually warming as well.

I wondered how long it had been since I last visited the school’s courtyard. At the very least, I hadn’t come since second term had started, so it must have been before summer break, likely in spring. The deep green leaves I saw at that time were starting to gain just a little bit of color. And if it had been a long time since I had come here, it had been an even longer time since I had been here with a purpose.

I never thought I would wait here for Senpai again.

I wondered if there was a similar courtyard in the high school. Maybe I would meet Senpai there in the coming year. Then, after that, Senpai would graduate again... I wondered if she was planning to go to college? We hadn’t talked about anything as far off as that. But, just like when Senpai went off to high school, it would be an unavoidable problem before long. That was just another thing that I didn’t know about her.

She should be here soon... I stretched out my neck to look around for her. Although the uniform was the same at the high school, I still felt like she would stand out if she walked around on the junior high grounds after school. I didn’t see her anywhere, so I looked at the school building instead. It had changed a little over the past six months, though not for the better, I thought as my eyes were drawn to the small differences.

The walls were duller now, as though crusted over with dirt from the summer. And though it was around the same time of day as before, the shadows seemed as though they were longer than they had been in spring. They must have built up something more inside them since six months, or even a year ago.

Nothing stays the same forever. Everything has a beginning and an ending.

After a short while, Senpai appeared.

When we had come here to meet, I had sometimes waited, while other times Senpai arrived first... Both things felt nostalgic now. It was almost like the two of us alone had turned back time to one year ago.

As soon as I saw Senpai approaching, I stood up from the bench. My intention was to walk over quickly, but my legs had other ideas, hurrying over in a near-sprint. In contrast to my impatience, Senpai stopped still, smiling faintly at me as I ran to her.

I wondered why I felt such loneliness.

Under the autumn sky, I had finally met with Senpai again. And yet, I didn't feel like the distance between us was shrinking.

"Your hair's getting longer." Senpai didn't even greet me before she pointed that out.

"Do you think so?" I pinched at a strand of my hair, which came down to my neck. The last time I had seen Senpai in person was the spring, as was the last time I came to the courtyard.

For Senpai and I, time had stopped just a bit before spring.

"More importantly, Senpai..." I wanted to ask why she had called me here, but for some reason, I couldn't coax my voice to come out.

Instead, I tried to touch Senpai's arm, as though clinging to her. But Senpai avoided me and moved away. "Senpai?"

Unsmiling, Senpai looked away for a moment. But then she turned to me.

"So, Sayaka-chan."

When she called me that, I somewhat unexpectedly remembered something.

It was about two and a half years ago. As a new student, I had gotten invitations to all kinds of clubs. Among them, Senpai had been in the choir club. It was much louder in comparison to the others, though that might have been the nature of the club.

Among all of those loud voices, there had been just one person with a gentle voice, inviting me in. When she asked my name and I gave it, that upperclassman called me by my name too, easily and warmly.

“Sayaka-chan, is it? Nice to meet you.”

An upperclassman had started calling me by my first name with *-chan* on the end, even though we had only just met. I remembered feeling terribly uncomfortable.

I wonder why that memory came back to me now, of all times.

“You and I aren’t children anymore.”

In the outside world, junior high school students were always treated like children. So I didn’t understand at first what Senpai was trying to say all of a sudden.

“So...” Senpai hesitated. Some part of me wanted her to wait, too.

“Umm...?”

I couldn’t grasp what kind of conversation we were about to have.

With the warm, endlessly peaceful scenery in the background behind us, Senpai finally said it.

“I don’t think we should play at dating like this anymore. It’s not good for us.”

My shock was dull, long, and intermittent.

It made my heart go numb. I couldn’t say a word.

My breathing stopped, as though something were pushing down on my heart intensely from the outside.

There were many things that had been significant in that one sentence.

Dating.

It's not good for us.

But what bothered me the most was the word *play*.

Play. Joke around. It's not real, just a passing fancy.

Senpai's love was all just for fun, no more serious than skipping a step as she went up the stairs.

Ah...

I saw all at once what I'd been closing my eyes to. The way Senpai had seen me all this time came to light, sending my thoughts reeling.

A feeling not unlike disappointment engulfed my vision, distorting Senpai's outline. It melded with the melting scenery and shuddered in the bright sunlight. An unsteady radiance, as though I were looking up at the sun from underwater.

"It was just a little phase, really."

When I heard that remark, I realized the meaning of the sudden memory that had come back to me moments ago. Senpai's voice, and the warmth within it, was the same one I had heard that day.

"I mean, we're both girls—you know?"

My blurred vision came back to me, and I could see Senpai in front of my eyes again. The smile on her face as she tried to smooth everything over was that of a complete and total stranger.

I think that was the final blow.

"I see." My voice sounded like it was coming from someone else next to me.

It was like I was watching everything from above. I even thought I could see the back of my own head. Then Senpai said something, but I couldn't hear it. I turned my head down and started walking.

I was running away again, as though it were someone else's problem. I couldn't hear Senpai's voice anymore.

“So that’s how it is.”

Just a phase.

Play.

We’re both girls.

“Huh.”

Around and around, Senpai’s voice echoed and crisscrossed through my mind.

Occasionally, at the outskirts of my vision, there was a combustion of light and heat. I tried wiping my eyes, thinking that I was crying, but my fingertips weren’t wet. While my emotions had been whited out, my rational mind was gradually calming itself.

As my senses sharpened, the path ahead grew brighter and clearer. My defenseless heart was exposed to the picturesque sunlight. And as I observed my current self neutrally as if from the outside, I finally realized something.

I was angry.

Right now, I was incensed. But why? I plumbed the depths of my heart for the answer.

It was the flippant way Senpai had said goodbye, after I had revolved around her as though I lived to serve her.

All of Senpai’s words had been too irresponsible.

Did she not think anything of it?

Did she not understand what it meant to love someone?

Or what it meant for someone to come to love her in return?

Why had she said that to me, and made me say it, too?

I had worked so hard to become the kind of person she could love.

How could she say that when she was the one who made me like this?

After I got home, I sat down in a daze.

My head hung low, but I didn't cry. It was like an enormous sash was wrapped tight around my emotions, holding them in place. I felt no sadness, or even resentment. I simply breathed in the air of the room, my flattened heart shaking with each breath.

I had been dumped.

That concisely summarized the situation. Senpai told me she liked me, and then she told me we had to stop playing.

Playing.

For a moment, I lost my temper and almost hit something. But then, the anger seeped from my balled-up fist like blood. Lowering my arm limply, I placed my hand back on my knee.

The weather outside was cloudless, a sharp contrast to my mind and heart. With the clear skies setting a perfectly autumnal backdrop, the trees rustled in a gentle breeze.

The rest of the world was completely unaffected by everything that had happened. So this was an incredibly small thing. An utterly trivial event.

But that one little thing was everything to me.

The word "failure" came floating to me out of the darkness. It was the worst possible conclusion. If that was the only way I could describe having fallen in love with someone, then I was sure to suffer again.

Ah, I realized. I don't want to admit that, so I'm running away.

"What should I do...?"

The person I had become solely for Senpai had lost all value at once. *Incredible*, I thought. Nearly a whole year of my life had now become a total waste. At this point, I could barely recall who I had been before then, never mind determine who I would be from this point on.

What kind of person had I been before I had met Senpai?

And what was it about me that had drawn her interest?

"What made you fall in love with me, Senpai?"

What was her response? I could barely remember it anymore. I was already unclear about what I had loved about her, too. How long had she been like this, I wonder?

But she was the one to tell me she loved me... No, maybe that meant it was right for Senpai to cut things off, too.

When she'd said it, my mind had gone blank. It was like the words had been hung up in front of me, and just looking at them was all I could do. Now, I felt like I might be able to reply. Maybe it would be with resentment? Or a plea? But no matter what I said, I don't think my relationship with Senpai would have continued any further. If I tried to keep hanging on, that would just be crushing the last fragments into dust beneath our feet.

On impulse, I erased her phone number from my cell phone.

Resentment, bitterness, and regret. If that was all that was left for me to express, then this was for the best. Because I was sure that Senpai wouldn't be calling me.

It wasn't as though I hadn't suspected that this might happen. Senpai's attitude had certainly shown enough signs. I was just pretending not to see them, trying to believe in her. But I could hardly ignore it once I was confronted with it, assaulting my mind like a headache. Thinking back on it, when I went through each of my memories, there was a truth there that I never wanted to know.

Senpai had used the expression *yearning* a lot.

Yes, Senpai had yearned. She had yearned for a lover and for secret exchanges. To call someone. To kiss someone. To have a sweetheart, a special relationship, of her very own.

What Senpai had loved wasn't me, but the concept of love itself. There's a common expression, "In love with love." That described Senpai perfectly.

So that was why...

Though I had been thinking that Senpai was the only one for me, she hadn't thought the same. Senpai's love was love, and my love was Senpai. One of those could be replaced, and the other could not.

When I thought about it, I actually felt like I could be sick.

I vaguely remembered the exchange I once had with my grandmother. She said that when adults knew what the outcome of things would be, they became cowards. I felt like I might become one myself. Did that mean I had just become an adult?

We're not children anymore. Senpai's selfish remark weighed on my eyelids.

I wasn't a child, but I could hardly say I was an adult. And now I had lost the version of myself that Senpai wanted. So what exactly was I? I couldn't figure it out, nor did I have the energy to try.

I felt like a train that had rattled off its tracks, heading in the wrong direction to an unknown fate.

I tried to be forward-thinking, but my heart would not budge. Since I was being held down, I couldn't go forward, backward, right, or left. I couldn't even bring myself to try to move, so I just stayed still as time passed by meaninglessly.

If this was how it was always going to end...then I hoped I would never have my heart broken or be plunged into sadness again.

With that wish, I lowered my head.

When Senpai had gone to high school, we'd had fewer chances to meet. The days and weeks of not seeing her had dragged on and on, but I had believed that Senpai felt the same loneliness. And I just kept believing that, never actually doing anything concrete about it...

I had just been dreaming all along.

So of course, when I woke from that dream, it was obvious that there would be nothing left for me.

With the excuse that I no longer wanted to commute by train, I deviated from the usual graduation path from the junior high to high school.

This was the second lie I had told in order to change my surroundings. My parents accepted it as readily as the first. I had given up on going to the private

school that everyone said was best for me, just as I gave up on taking all kinds of lessons to better myself. *Ah, maybe I'm not as put together as I thought I was*, I mused.

In both cases, I met someone, was thrown into chaos, and abruptly quit partway through. This time around, I wouldn't allow that to happen again.

I silently hardened my heart as I attended the high school opening ceremony.

It was chilly for an early April day, inside of the gym as well as outside. The legs of the chairs arranged inside were as cold to the touch as if winter had returned. The other new students around me seemed nervous, frozen in place as they quietly listened to the opening remarks. I was the same way, but I barely processed the principal's greetings. No matter how hard I tried not to think about it, all of my conversations with Senpai kept replaying in the back of my mind.

It would have been easier if they were all awful, without a single positive moment among them. But it wasn't like that, so they kept flickering before my eyes from front to back and front again. I couldn't settle down.

The principal's welcome ended, and they moved on to the new student representative's speech.

I wasn't the representative. That meant that whoever was had done better than me on the entrance exam. I didn't want to blame it on Senpai, but this was undeniable proof that I had neglected my studies. I looked at the platform, thinking I might have been up there if all those things hadn't happened with Senpai. But I suppose if I hadn't met her, I would probably be going to the high school at Tomosumi now.

I let a small sigh slip out and clenched my hands into fists in my lap. Whoever this person was, I would catch up with them right away, I decided. I felt relief at the ambition that filled me. I'd been worried that I had forgotten how to do this while I was involved with Senpai, but I could still properly discipline myself.

It's fine. I'll be fine.

I would forget my mistake unconsciously, as easily as breathing, I decided. *I'll just forget it...all of it.* I just wanted to be able to say that it was just a phase for

me, too. I wondered how long it would be until I managed to convince myself of that.

“Year 1, class 3: Nanami Touko.”

The name of our representative was called. Judging by the name, it must be a girl. A girl who, at least at the moment, was better than me.

I was peeved. But at the same time, I was also curious. I hadn’t had much experience losing to someone else before.

“Here.”

The voice that replied sounded somehow mature to me.

I sensed someone standing up from a chair some distance away to the back and side of me. At the same time, the cold air brushing against my legs seemed to change. It felt as though the air in the room was flowing towards the girl, bringing my attention with it.

I felt a premonition murmuring inside me, though it had no voice.

Something deep down tempted me to lower my head, but I ignored it as lightly as I could and naturally looked up.

Then I saw her.

In that instant...

When I saw her smiling face in profile, and how her black hair gently flowed in a way that made me forget the chill, three round white beacons of different sizes lit up in my mind.

In that instant...

Regret eddied within me. I had decided to leave my all-girls’ school in order to convince myself that my falling in love with another girl was just a phase. On the other hand, I was also constantly thinking about what I could have done differently to make things last between me and Senpai. I was worried that I couldn’t go back to the person I was before I fell for Senpai and tried to change myself to her liking. The only way I could keep moving forward was if I told

myself that love was simply foolish and unnecessary. I couldn't talk to anyone in my family about these feelings.

And so I decided never to fall in love again, to avoid complicating things further.

I was supposed to be embracing those ideas right here and now.

But in that instant...

All at once, none of it mattered anymore.

I don't remember much else of what happened at the entrance ceremony.

It was the first time I had been so incapable of focusing on anything else. I was paying attention, but to the wrong thing entirely. It was as though my vision had been squeezed to a single point. Essentially, all I could think about was *her*.

Once the ceremony ended, we each moved to our own classes. As I walked out of the gym, I wrote the names *Nanami* and *Saeki* in the air. In order to keep those around me from thinking it was odd, I did it quickly and in small script.

Since we were lined up according to the order of our names, she must be behind me, I realized. I took a single step out of the line of people following behind our homeroom teacher and slowed down. Little by little, I fell back, closing the distance between our names.

It wasn't as though I had anything specific in mind. I just wanted to try talking to her.

The distance shortened with every step I took. When I finally caught sight of Nanami Touko out of the corner of my eye, I froze.

After I checked one more time to be sure it was her, I grew nervous. *Now what do I do?* When I glanced at her, trying to think of how to start a conversation, we ended up locking eyes. Nanami Touko's eyes went slightly wide and round.

She's beautiful, I thought in the midst of the chaos churning inside me. My

mind almost blanked again.

“Nanami-san.” Fortunately, I wasn’t shaken enough for my voice to crack. I think I managed to feign a nonchalant tone.

Nanami Touko was silent for a beat before she responded. “Hmm?” The delicate movements of her eyes suggested the questions, *Do I know you? When did I introduce myself?*

“They called your name during the student representative’s speech.”

“Oh, right.”

Her surprised voice sounded much more approachable than it had during the speech she gave. Nanami Touko was at an ordinary distance from me, and there was an ordinary mood around us.

Her eyes wandered for a moment. Slowly, they seemed to make a circuit around the hall before she asked me, “How was my speech? Did any of it seem weird to you?”

Although she acted casual, I could tell from her tone that she genuinely wanted to hear my opinion. She had conducted herself with such confidence that she didn’t seem like a new student before, so I hadn’t expected her to need any affirmation.

So instead of teasing her, I simply told her the truth. “It was wonderful.”

If I had been my normal self, I would have felt at least a bit of competitiveness growing within me. But right now, I couldn’t bring about that sense of strife. An even larger wave of emotion had swallowed it up and stifled it.

“Oh, good.”

Her face relaxed slightly, as though she were relieved. She quickly hid this moment of weakness, though, and looked at me more closely. Her eyes looked to be asking for my name.

“Saeki. Saeki Sayaka.”

For the first time since I had started high school, I told someone my name. On the other hand, the entire body of new students probably already knew Nanami Touko’s name.

She was walking one or two steps ahead of me. It felt as though my heart was being tugged along with her.

“Saeki-san, is it? Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.”

We both faced forward, and our conversation cut off there. Of course it would. We didn’t have anything in particular to talk about.

We both knew nothing about the other. Even if there would eventually be something between us, this was still only the beginning of it all.

As we caught sight of our classroom, Nanami Touko addressed me again. “Say, do you have any interest in the student council?”

“The student council?”

“I’m planning to join, myself. What about you, Saeki-san?”

We stopped together by the side of the entrance to the classroom.

I thought it was rather unusual for her to have already decided that on the first day of school. There were probably a fair amount of people who continued with club activities from junior high, but student council? Perhaps she had been yearning to do that sort of thing.

Or maybe...

“Do you know someone on the council?”

I wondered if she was joining in order to follow someone.

To me, it was a simple question. Maybe she had an older sibling in the student council, or something like that. But there was something off about her reply, which came after a weighty pause.

“No, not really.”

Perhaps she was a terrible liar, or perhaps she was more shaken than I thought, but her reply was easy to see through. Her voice and body language were both harder than a clod of earth in winter.

I felt like there was definitely more to the story. But we didn’t yet have a relationship that would permit me to pry any further. I decided to change the

topic instead.

“So...why are you asking *me* about it?”

We had only just started talking, so I was curious why she had invited me.

As soon as the topic changed, Nanami Touko seemed to relax a little. She narrowed her eyes as though she were looking at something slightly complex and put her finger to her chin.

“Hmm...because you kind of seem like you’d be a serious person?”

“What an honor.”

I felt as though someone else had told me that in the past. How many people saw me in that way?

Though we say that people are all different, there are certain universal truths that apply to everyone. Perhaps this was another case of that. Nanami Touko was probably beautiful to anyone who saw her.

“Perhaps I’ll give it a try.”

In actuality, as long as Nanami Touko had invited me to do it, I probably would have followed her into the volleyball club, the softball club, or anything else she cared to name.

When I looked at her again, my emotions were steeped in the essence of Nanami Touko. And I was being pulled in.

She created a river between us, a sea, a powerful current. The surface of those waters was blindingly brilliant, so beautiful that those who came upon it could not look at it directly.

“It was nice meeting you.”

She welcomed me with a warm smile. When she faced me up close, I started to worry that my ears and face might be bright red every time we spoke from now on, at least until I got used to it.



But I could tell that there was still distance in her smile. If anything, it felt as though the smile might even be meant to protect that distance.

Sensing that only made my interest grow all the more.

As we went into the classroom, I remembered when I had been invited into the choir club. I had met Senpai then...and failed. But now, someone had taken my hand again.

I was doing it all over, as though I had forgotten the scars and the pain.

I just don't learn my lesson, I thought, laughing at myself a little.

Maybe I never will. This time, I broke into an even bigger smile.

Eventually, she started calling me Sayaka, and I started calling her Touko.

Once I met Nanami Touko, I accepted it.

It wasn't understanding, or resignation, just acceptance. Of myself, and of the fact that I could only love girls.

Afterword

THIS TIME AROUND, I was charged with writing a novel set in the world of *Bloom into You*.

This is like an episode zero about Saeki-senpai, with the rest of the story continuing in the manga. I would love to write more, but that isn't for me to decide, so it's just a personal wish.

As for the person who *contributed* the illustrations...in a situation like this, I suppose it would be more apt to call myself the one who *contributed* the text. The one in the leading role is definitely Nakatani-san, after all.

In that case, isn't it strange for me to be the one writing the afterword? It's almost like asking a random illustrator to write it.

Well, I suppose this will do. Thank you so very much for reading.

—Hitoma Iruma



Hello, I'm Nakatani Nio, the original author of *Bloom into You*. Leaving the characters you created in someone else's care takes quite some courage, but when I heard that the person writing the spin-off novel would be Hitoma-san, I agreed without a moment's hesitation. And I definitely made the right choice. Thank you so much for this wonderful novel. The portrayal of Sayaka was so perfect that the amount of times I said "Sayaka" out loud is pretty funny, I think.

—Nakatani Nio



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